

**INDIA  
AND  
THE RAJ**

**1919-1947**

**GLORY, SHAME AND BONDAGE**

**Volume Two**

**SUNITI KUMAR GHOSH**

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## About the book & Author

Which classes did the Congress leadership represent before 1947? What were their goals and methods of struggle? What were the objects of the *seemingly* anti-imperialist movements they occasionally initiated? And where did they lead India to -- freedom or more sophisticated bondage than direct colonial relationship? Relying mainly on primary sources, this book seeks to find out answers to these and related questions. The answers are wholly contrary to the basic assumptions with which conventional historiography starts.

While exposing what was India's shame, *India and the Raj 1919-1947* also deals briefly with the glorious aspects of India's anti-colonial struggles -- the struggles waged by the peasantry, the working class and the urban petty bourgeoisie. These struggles and the movements launched by the Congress leadership were not complementary, as is generally assumed, but essentially of an antagonistic character. In the absence of a mature revolutionary party these struggles failed to merge in a broad stream powerful enough to sweep away imperialist rule and its domestic props.

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## Chapter One

### Towards Greater Collaboration between Imperialist and Indian Big Capital

#### *Revolution and War*

With the end of World War I, the basis of a new world war was laid. World War I resolved no contradictions: only, *for the time being*, Germany ceased to be a rival of imperialist Britain and France. But other old contradictions became intensified and new ones emerged. The birth of the Soviet Union and the failure of all the aggressive campaigns launched by the imperialist powers to overthrow the new regime meant that a considerable part of the world dropped out of the capitalist-imperialist system. The Russian Revolution was followed by an upsurge of revolutionary struggles in different countries of Europe. Revolutions actually broke out in Hungary and Bavaria but met with defeat. There were revolutionary uprisings in some other countries. Land was seized by the peasants and factories by the workers in Italy. Italy was on the verge of a proletarian revolution when, in 1922, the fascists under the leadership of Benito Mussolini captured power. It was a regime of naked terror over the working people in the interest of big capital. The tide of revolutionary struggle retreated from about 1922, though there were fitful struggles in some country or another during the rest of the twenties.

The inter-imperialist contradictions became acute. Britain emerged out of the war much weaker than before. The old imperialist power, already past its prime, could hardly rival the U.S.A., the young imperialist power, whose star was in the ascendant. At the end of the war Britain changed from a creditor to a debtor country -- heavily indebted to the U.S.A. It was squeezed out of its informal empire in Latin America by its trans-Atlantic rival, and much of its interests in Canada and Australia was taken over by U.S. capital. There was a clash between the two for markets, including the Indian market. To protect its imperial market in India and other parts of the empire, Britain imposed imperial preference, while U.S. capital was clamoring for an open door. Rivalry in other spheres too (for instance, building naval power to command the seas) was acute. Naval disarmament conferences and pacts like the Kellogg Pact (1928) between the leading capitalist powers proved to be of little worth. They all prated about peace while preparing for war.

With the rise of fascism in Germany and the beginnings of Japan's wars of aggression, Britain's contradictions with the U.S.A. were overshadowed by the clash of interests between Britain, the U.S.A. and France on the one hand and Germany, Japan and Italy on the other. We shall return to it later.

After a brief post-war boom in some capitalist countries there was economic stagnation in the entire capitalist world, followed by a devastating crisis with its attendant mass unemployment and ruin, lasting for about four years from 1929 to 1933. Only the Soviet Union was free from the horrors of this crisis. When the industrial and agricultural production in the capitalist world sank to very low levels, it was only the much-maligned Soviet Union that made spectacular economic advances at a rate never before attained anywhere in the world. The Soviet people had embarked on the uncharted path of building socialism -- a task which, if successful, would have changed the course of history.

The economic crisis of 1929-33 in the capitalist world brought in its train bankruptcy of tens of thousands of joint-stock companies, closure of factories, unemployment and ruin of tens of millions of people. It intensified the struggle between rival capitalist groups for foreign markets, trade war, currency war, dumping and the like. The imperialists tried to stave off the effects of the crisis not only at the expense of their own workers, peasants and other toiling people but also at the expense of the toiling people of the colonies. As we shall see, the fall in the prices of agricultural products by almost a half as a result of the crisis hit the already-impooverished Indian peasant very severely.

The political and economic crisis in the capitalist world gave rise to two contradictory trends -- trends towards revolution on the one hand and fascism and imperialist war on the other to avert revolution.

After the national uprising in Ireland and the defeat of the revolutions in Hungary, Bavaria and Austria in the early twenties, revolutions again broke out in the 1930s in Viet Nam (then a part of French Indo-China), Latin American and other countries. The Chinese revolution suffered initial defeat in 1927 but soon gathered strength and, under the leadership of Mao Tsetung, established extensive liberated areas in North and North-west China by 1939.

On the other hand, the seeds of war were sown by the Versailles treaty, which Germany, vanquished in World War I, was forced to sign with the Allied and Associated Powers in June 1919. The victor powers, chiefly Britain and France, sought to cripple Germany economically and militarily and to improve their own material prospects at the expense of Germany. They took away the German colonies, not to grant them freedom but to share them out among themselves under the League of Nations mandates. Several German-speaking areas were separated from her and attached to neighbouring countries, and Germany was split into two by a 'corridor', which was given to Poland. Huge war reparations were demanded of her which she was not capable of paying. Stringent terms were imposed on her so that militarily she would remain weak and defenseless. Naturally, the Germans wanted nothing better than to tear up the Versailles Treaty. For several years after the end of the war Germany struggled to overcome her economic hardships, which were accentuated by the huge indemnities she was made to pay. The German working class was a quite powerful, but divided, force owing allegiance to two parties -- the Communists and the Socialists. Before 1930 Hitler and his National Socialist Party were far from strong. But with the onset of the severe economic crisis in 1930, Hitler, who harped on the injustice of the Versailles Treaty and spouted venom against the Jews and Communism, went from strength to strength. Big industrialists and landlords rallied to his support. Fascism triumphed in Germany in 1933. Ruthless suppression of the working class and domination of Europe and ultimately of the world were its twin aims. Payment of war indemnities had already stopped: Hitler tore up the Versailles Treaty and started making feverish war preparations.

The monopoly bourgeoisie destroyed all vestiges of bourgeois democracy in Italy, Germany, Spain and some countries of Central Europe to maintain their rule and fulfil their imperialist aims. They launched war against their own people before they went to war against other peoples.

Japan invaded and occupied Manchuria in 1931, and in 1937 invaded North and Central China. By 1938 she reached Canton in the South. Italy conquered Ethiopia in 1935, and in 1936 Germany and Italy supported General Franco's war against Republican Spain, intervened militarily and entrenched themselves respectively in North and South Spain. Germany and Japan entered into an Anti-Comintern Agreement in 1935: Italy signed it in 1937. Early in 1938 Germany annexed Austria and, then in the autumn of that year, the Sudetan region of Czechoslovakia. German troops marched in and the whole of Czechoslovakia was occupied in March 1939. These aggressive wars in the three continents brought within their ambit about 50 crores of people, and were a prelude to World War II.

These aggressions and conquests could not take place without the silent connivance of the ruling classes of Britain and France, especially Britain. These aggressions by Japan, Italy and Germany constituted a challenge to the imperial interests of Britain, France and the U.S.A., but they, though more powerful, avoided confrontation with the aggressive powers. They rejected the Soviet Union's repeated appeals for building collective security, for pursuing a policy of collective resistance to the aggressors. Instead, Britain, France and the U.S.A. followed a policy of non-intervention, a policy of appeasement of the aggressors, even at risk to their own strategic interests. By their policies, Britain, France and the U.S.A. wanted to induce the fascist aggressors to advance towards the east and launch war against the Soviet Union. They hoped to embroil these powers in a war with the Soviet Union and to step in and share the spoils when both would be exhausted. When this hope withered away with the conclusion of a non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union in August 1939, and when Germany invaded Poland, they revised their policy. Then Britain and France marched against Germany as anti-fascist crusaders. World War II began early in September 1939 -- vaster, more prolonged and much more costly in men and materials than World War I. Imperialist war was the inevitable consequence of the rivalry between the colonial powers to exploit and oppress the people and dominate the world. It is inseparable from the capitalist system. So long as the capitalist system prevails, there is no escape from war between classes and between nations.

## *The Crisis and the Indian Big Bourgeoisie*

The world crisis of 1929-33, instead of giving rise to antagonistic contradictions between imperialist capital and Indian big capital, as V. I. Pavlov and others have argued, helped to bring them closer than before. It was not merely fear of the people but objective economic conditions that were driving them nearer to each other during the thirties, despite some contradictions.

While the economic crisis hit hard the Indian people -- the peasantry, the workers, the urban petty bourgeoisie and the small bourgeoisie which had no foreign links -- it contributed in certain ways to the further growth and development of the big bourgeoisie. The thirties were a period of unprecedented growth and expansion of Indian big comprador capital. Due to the catastrophic fall in the prices of agricultural products -- about 50 per cent on an average -- the peasantry was ruined. The rise in taxes, such as those on salt and kerosene, added to their woes. The value of India's exports of merchandise (other than precious metals) fell from Rs 381 crore in 1928-9 to Rs 181 crore in 1931-2. The decline in the value of imports was no less steep: it fell by almost a half over the same years. By curtailing imports of consumer goods, the depression afforded virtual protection to indigenous industry. Amiya Kumar Bagchi notes that "aggregate private investment in real terms during some years of the depression was higher than during the middle years of the twenties."<sup>(1)</sup> While the proportion of consumer goods to total imports decreased, imports of machinery and industrial raw materials increased. This trend continued throughout the thirties, and the beneficiaries were the Indian big bourgeois, who, depending on imported capital goods and industrial raw materials, manufactured mainly consumer goods.

Besides, to make up the loss in customs duties due to decline in external trade, tariff was substantially raised in 1930 and 1931 for revenue purposes. Since 1922, the rate of import duty was 15 per cent, except on cotton piece goods, on which it was 11 per cent. In February 1930 the import duty on cotton textiles was raised to 15 per cent. In 1931 the general tariff rate, including those on cotton textiles, was first increased to 20 per cent; but a preference of 5 per cent was granted to British low quality cotton imports.

Moreover, protection was granted to several industries like cotton textiles, sugar, paper, iron and steel in the thirties. Traditional imports from Britain and British colonies were being displaced by non-British imports. While protection was granted to certain Indian industries, differential duties were fixed for British and other foreign goods. British industries like cotton textiles could not compete with those of other countries like Japan. To salvage as much of the Indian market as possible for several British industries, the principle of imperial preference was introduced in 1927 and continued afterwards.

During the depression years the Indian bourgeoisie came to enjoy two other important advantages - the fall in the level of wages of workers and in the prices of raw materials. The Bombay mill owners introduced the policies of rationalization and substantial wage-cuts in 1929 and, aided by the colonial state machinery, fought and overcame the workers' resistance.

All these factors contributed to a spurt in industrial development. Assuming industrial output in 1925-6 as 100, it rose to 100.7 in 1930, 132.4 in 1934 and 166.8 in 1938.<sup>(2)</sup> According to Rajat Kanta Ray, the industrial workforce grew annually at 1 per cent between 1921 and 1931 but the rate of growth quadrupled between 1932 and 1937.<sup>(3)</sup>

While the old, or relatively old, big bourgeois groups like the Tatas, Birlas, Sri Rams, Singhanias, and Walchands vastly expanded their industrial activities, there were several new entrants into industry who had previously been *banians*, brokers and big speculators, like the Goenkas, Dalmia Jains, Thapars, Chettiars, and Naidus. Many of the new entrants like the Goenkas and Chettiars were diversifying from trading and indigenous banking into cotton textiles and other industries. Speaking of the Madras Presidency, Raman Mahadevan observes: "The late twenties and thirties marked a turning point with regard to investment of South Indian capital in industry. The Depression by sharply turning the terms of trade between agriculture and industry in favour of the latter, brought about a significant shift of capital from agriculture and money-

lending to industry.... Particularly significant in the context was the phenomenal growth of the textile industry centred on the Coimbatore region." (4)

Even during the depression years profits were quite handsome. For instance, Sir Shri Ram's Delhi Cloth Mills paid a dividend of 135 per cent in 1930-31. (5) This might be exceptional in the textile industry, but sugar earned huge fortunes for the big bourgeois -- the Birlas, Shri Rams, Dalmias, Thapars, Walchands, Soorajmull-Nagarmulls and several others. George Schuster, then Finance Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, observed that the sugar industry earned a profit of 400 per cent in 1933. (6) This, again, might be exceptional but the rates of profit were very high.

Paper mills had been owned and controlled mainly by British managing agencies like Heilgers, Balmer Lawrie and Andrew Yule. But from about 1936 the Birlas, Thapars and Dalmias entered the paper industry and set up large mills.

Between 1931 and 1939 the Birlas, Dalmias, Mafatlals, Shri Rams, Walchands and so on had a meteoric rise. (7)

### *The Gold Drain*

England was forced to go off the gold standard on 21 September 1931 when the second Round Table Conference was sitting in London. The Government of India, without reference to the British cabinet, announced that the rupee was de linked from gold as well as sterling in order to minimize the impact of Britain's economic crisis on the Indian economy. But Secretary of State Samuel Hoare instructed New Delhi to issue an ordinance linking the rupee back to sterling. Kanji Dwarkadas (8) writes: "I was in Simla all that fortnight of this crisis in constant contact with Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer, the Acting Member for Law, and Sir Ibrahim Rahimtoola, President of the Indian Legislative Assembly. Lord Willingdon [the Viceroy] and all the members of his Executive Council protested against Sir Samuel Hoare's cable and offered to resign in a body.... Hoare got hold of Ghanshyamdas Birla, who was in London for the Round Table Conference...and between them, they managed to get a press interview from Gandhiji on this rupee-pound crisis. Reuters circulated Gandhiji's interview that nothing hasty should be done at this crisis and the *status quo* [that is, the sterling-rupee link] should be maintained!" According to Dwarkadas, in his subsequent cable to Willingdon, Hoare referred to Gandhi's advice, refused to accept the offer of resignation from the Viceroy and his Executive Councilors, called upon them to maintain the status quo by re linking the rupee to the pound as before. (9) So the Viceroy, to quote R.J. Moore, "vainly resisted to a point just short of resignation the Cabinet's decision to keep the rupee tied to the pound, regardless of the price of gold". (10) And the rupee remained tied to the fluctuating pound at the old rate of one rupee to 1s. 6d. to serve imperialist interests.

G.D. Birla claimed that he had objected to re linking the rupee to sterling. (11) It was not unusual for men like Birla to take a public stance which was quite contrary to their private stand on an issue. They were ever eager to serve the raj in order to serve themselves.

The fact is, while as a result of such a step the Indian people were further impoverished, some big compradors like the Birlas, besides the imperialists, were the beneficiaries. Because of the severe economic crisis, the peasants and other toiling people, whose only savings consisted in gold and silver trinkets, were forced to bring them to the market. The buying-up and export of this 'distress gold' earned high profits for big Indian bullion merchants like the Birlas and saved the British raj from a worse financial crisis. The huge gold drain from India went to meet the payment of 'home charges' and to service the so-called 'national debts' -- that is, as tribute to the colonial masters.

Speaking in the House of Commons on 29 February 1932, Samuel Hoare said: "More gold has been exported since last September or rather gold has been exported from India since last September at a higher rate than it has even been exported from the gold fields of South Africa." (12) R.J. Moore has observed that "Suspicion was rife that Britain had manipulated the rupee in order to snatch the vast private hoards of Indian gold.... The monetary experts on the Indian Council of the Secretary of State, Sir Henry Strakosch



and Sir Reginald Mant, reported in February 1932: '[Britain] has been able to use the gold for the discharge of its foreign obligations and to that extent to avoid impairment of its exchange with gold standard countries'."(13) Referring to the gold drain from India, R. Palme Dutt, who cited the London *Economist's* estimates of the huge size of the drain between 1931 and 1937, observed: "Once again, in a new form, as in the days of the Industrial Revolution, the measure of recovery of British capitalism in 1933-37 was built up on the spoliation of India."(14)

Who were the Indian accomplices of British finance capital in this massive spoliation of India? The bullion trade of the whole of India passed through Bombay, and the firm of Sir Chunilal B. Mehta, cousin of Sir Purshotamdas and "the king of the bullion trade in Bombay", (15) along with four others, served as "the sole links between the London bullion merchants and the 'orthodox' bullion merchants of Bombay".(16) Among the leading brokers in the Bombay Bullion Exchange were the G.D. Birla Brothers.(17)

When Gandhi, Patel and other top Congress leaders were in prison in 1932, the *Bombay Congress Bulletin*, issued by the Emergency Council, Bombay Provincial Congress Committee, branded Purshotamdas Thakurdas and Birla as traitors. It stated:

"SIXTY MILLION POUNDS WORTH OF INDIAN GOLD (18) was exported from this country to England during the last year. IT HAS BEEN A VERITABLE WINDFALL TO BRITAIN.... By helping to send Indian gold to England at a time like the present when India is fighting a desperate fight for liberty and life, the Indian Bullion merchant has literally supplied our enemies with valuable ammunition *at our own expense to be used against us*. By helping in the dangerous flight of gold from this country, the Indian traitors dealing in bullion have deliberately impoverished us to enrich the enemy, have helped to lower the already low credit of India in the economic world, have contrived to increase India's dependence on the worst enemy, on the murderous parasite which is living on her vitals.... Sir Purshotamdas and Mr Birla have made lakhs recently from this immoral traffic.... Meanwhile, we shall fight both the enemy and the traitor."(19)

But their fight against the traitors had to be abandoned almost as soon as it began. When the news of their demonstrations in front of Sir Purshotamdas's palatial residence in Bombay reached Vallabhbhai Patel in prison, he immediately sent instructions to withdraw the Congress pickets. Patel was quite right in claiming that Sir Purshotamdas was "more *our* man than anyone else's".(20)

With the help of the big compradors the British imperialists were able to shift some of the burden of their financial crisis on to the shoulders of the Indian people.

### *Convergence of Interest Despite Some Contradictions*

Britain's share in India's imports had been sharply declining since the end of World War I.(21) Britain's imperial market in India was increasingly threatened by other imperialist powers. As noted before, British goods were being replaced in the Indian market by foreign goods to a great extent and the competition between British and Indian goods was far less than that between British and foreign goods.

With the onset of the world crisis, the Federation of British Industries (FBI) "pointed to the increased importance of Empire for the British economy and prescribed imperial economic co-operation as the only possible way for the crisis-ridden and increasingly non-competitive British economy".(22) As the FBI noted: "Great Britain has the possibility of creating (with her empire) an economic group of unlimited possibilities"; without it, her competitive position would be "extremely disadvantageous."(23)

The Indian big bourgeois were no less eager to respond. In October 1931, when the Round Table Conference was in session, G. D. Birla told Edward Benthall, who represented expatriate British capitalists at the conference, that "henceforward, he desired to work in collaboration and to drop all his hostility".(24) On both sides there was a desire "to get together", "a more co-operative attitude".

While protective tariff was raised in the interest of Indian industries and, mainly, at the expense of non-British foreign goods, the principle of granting imperial preference was adopted as a tonic to the ailing British industries. The Ottawa Conference was held in 1932 to decide upon preferential rates of imports from empire countries. To quote Kate Mitchell, "In this way the tariff system of the early twenties, originally proclaimed as a means for accelerating Indian industrialization, was transformed into a system which assisted British industry to compete in the Indian market, while giving India in return the privilege of favored rates for the sale of her raw materials and semi-manufactures in the British market..."<sup>(25)</sup> This imposition of imperial preference was designed to tie India and other British colonies and dominions closer to Britain and perpetuate the same old colonial economy.

Ottawa arrested the decline of British exports to India only temporarily.<sup>(26)</sup> Even with imperial preference, British goods could hardly compete with the goods from other imperialist countries as well as with certain Indian products like cotton textiles of certain varieties, that had the advantage of cheap labour. The main factor contributing to the decline of British exports not only to India but to the world as a whole<sup>(27)</sup> was the weakness of British industry compared to the rising industries of Japan, the U.S.A., Germany etc.

Was the attitude of the Indian big bourgeoisie towards Ottawa one of hostility, as is usually represented?

On behalf of the Committee of the FICCI, its president Walchand Hirachand in a representation in April 1932 to the Secretary of State for India, the President of the Imperial Economic Conference, Ottawa, and others, objected to the *composition of the Indian delegation nominated by the Government of India without reference to the FICCI*. He complained that "The Government had so far failed to acquaint the Indian community with the potentialities of the Ottawa Conference by not taking them into their confidence with regard to Government's attitude on these questions". He stated that "it should be left to the future popular Government of the country, that would be constituted by the new Government of India Act, to shape their policy regarding inter-imperial trade relations, including the application of reciprocal preferential tariff agreement..."<sup>(28)</sup> The main objection taken by the different Indian Chambers of Commerce was to the personnel of the Indian delegation which consisted of the nominees of the Government.<sup>(29)</sup>

It is interesting that contrary to the FICCI president's formal representation, the letters of the Secretary of the FICCI, dated 8 and 9 April 1932, to the Commerce Department, Government of India, showed eagerness of the apex body of Indian trade and industry to send its representatives to attend the conference. In those letters the FICCI Secretary asked "whether the Government of India intended to offer facilities of that nature [facilities just to attend the Conference and obtain relevant Conference papers] to such observers as might be deputed by the Federation at their own cost, and whether the Government of India proposed to invite the Federation to appoint representatives to attend the Conference". In his reply, dated 31 May 1932, the Government of India's Commerce Secretary, Drake, curtly informed the FICCI Secretary that no such facilities would be offered.<sup>(30)</sup>

According to G.K. Lieten, a majority of the members of the Indian Merchants Chamber of Bombay lent their support to the Ottawa agreement.<sup>(31)</sup> How did the most 'radical' among the Indian bourgeois, Birla, react to the proposal for the Ottawa Conference? In reply to the Secretary of State's letter of 28 February 1932,<sup>(32)</sup> G.D. Birla informed him on 14 March 1932 that "Sir Purshotamdas would be delighted to accept the invitation [to attend the Ottawa Conference on behalf of "the Indian trade and commerce"] when it is extended to him" and that "The committee of the Federation will not be averse to this proposition". He assured him that they realized the importance of this Conference and "*you may rely on our support in the right direction*".<sup>(33)</sup>

Contrary to the expectations of the Birlas and Thakurdases and to Hoare's advice, the Viceroy nominated the delegation excluding Thakurdas and his ilk. The objection of several Northern and Western Chambers of Commerce was actually to the composition of the delegation, not to the conference itself. It may be pointed out that Sir R.K. Shanmukhan Chetty, who was a leading member of the Indian Chamber of Commerce, Coimbatore and a member of the Committee of the FICCI, and became the first Finance Minister of India after the transfer of power, was included in the delegation to Ottawa, which concluded the Ottawa agreement.



On 25 November 1932 when Thakurdas, who participated in the Third Round Table Conference in London, informed Birla that Samuel Hoare "complained to me about your taking a leading part in the agitation against the Ottawa bill",<sup>(34)</sup> Birla immediately sent Thakurdas a wire asking Thakurdas to inform Hoare that he had "done nothing to embarrass or organize any opposition" and to "assure him" that "he will not only find me *never* embarrassing but really helpful if only there was more trust which is hopelessly lacking [in] India..."<sup>(35)</sup>

Thakurdas, whom Birla wanted to represent India at Ottawa, was quite categorical about granting preference even to Lancashire goods. Earlier, in March 1930, Thakurdas had assured the raj that he would vote preferences. He promised the Indian Cotton Enquiry Committee, Manchester, that *he would do all he could to further its interests and "strengthen the relationship between India and Lancashire"*.<sup>(36)</sup> *He denied that there was "any incompatibility of interest between England and India"*.<sup>(37)</sup>

As A.D.D. Gordon observed, "Thus any condemnation was only show, and designed to cover from public view a secret process which involved short-circuiting the imperial chain of influence."<sup>(38)</sup>

The year 1933, according to H. Venkatasubbiah, "saw a reconciliation between the two" -- the government and the business magnates. "Both seemed keen to 'normalize' relations. Representatives of industry joined those of Government in the negotiations for concluding a trade agreement between India and Japan," and Joseph Bhore, India government's Commerce Member, "came in praise" for this trade agreement at the 1934 annual meeting of the FICCI.<sup>(39)</sup> Though resented by the Ahmedabad mill-owners, the Lancashire-Bombay agreement (or Lees-Mody Pact) granting Lancashire goods further preference "than that unanimously recommended by the Tariff Board",<sup>(40)</sup> was concluded in 1933. B. Chatterjee writes that "the Lancashire men thought that they could see signs of a change of heart. [Raymond] Streat [of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce] cited as evidence Birla's talks with Lord Derby in the summer of 1934 when he had made 'vague suggestions' of a more co-operative attitude.... Even Kasturbhai Lalbhai [the leading mill magnate of Ahmedabad] spoke of the desirability of a period of soft pedalling so far as political agitation was concerned, and went out of his way to indicate that...he and his group were prepared to consider economic co-operation with the U.K. in general, provided that they should be admitted into the councils at which policy should be hammered out'."<sup>(41)</sup>

An FICCI memorandum of January 1936 contended that the Ottawa agreement hampered the trade relations with a number of foreign countries, suggested that it should be terminated and fresh negotiations should be started with the U.K. as well as other countries for trade treaties in consultation with representatives of commerce, agriculture and industry in India.<sup>(42)</sup> In March 1936 the Central Legislative Assembly recommended that "the Ottawa Agreement be terminated without delay".<sup>(43)</sup>

But it would be wrong to regard such opposition to the Ottawa agreement or the Indo-British Agreement of 1935 as reflecting the Indian big bourgeoisie's antagonism towards imperialist capital. What it sought was not the termination of the phase of its co-operation with British capital but a better bargain within its framework. Seeking to remove all misgivings about "the attitude of the Federation on the question of co-operation with Government", Padampat Singhanian, presiding over the annual session of the FICCI in 1936, emphasized "the importance of rapport between the Federation and the Government" and stated that the Committee of the FICCI "would always be willing to co-operate with the Government of India in negotiating trade treaties either with the U.K., the Dominions or India's foreign customers on a genuinely reciprocal basis..."<sup>(44)</sup>

To quote B. Chatterji, "denunciations did not mean the end of the principle of economic co-operation. Among the Indian commercial classes, as the Viceroy gloomily observed, there was 'a conviction that if India denounced the agreement, the U.K. would, for political as well as economic reasons, hurry forward with offers of an agreement much more favorable to India'."<sup>(45)</sup>

During the thirties both the Indian big bourgeoisie and British capital felt the need for a joint front against foreign trespassers into this British colony as well as indigenous rivals. A process of greater integration

between the two started taking place. The growth of British expatriate managing agencies was sluggish in the thirties and whatever fresh British capital was forthcoming could not fulfill their needs. During the inter-war period, especially in the thirties, a new relationship developed between the British managing agencies and Indian big capital. The *banians* and brokers of British firms, whose industrial career had just begun or was about to begin -- the Birlas, Goenkas, Bangurs, Jantias, Jalans, Bajorias, etc. -- increasingly invested in the companies controlled by British capital. They were allowed seats on the boards of the companies in which they invested but no share of control. Control remained firmly in the hands of the British managing agencies. "From the First World War onwards", writes Tomlinson, "British-controlled firms, starved of capital from London, were forming alliances with Indian businessmen..."<sup>(46)</sup> This process was going on not only in Calcutta but in Bombay and other places, too. A fusion of European and Indian big capital was taking place and large chunks of Indian big capital, subordinated to foreign capital, played the role of a junior partner.<sup>(47)</sup>

Besides, in the thirties and the early forties, British and Indian managing agencies combined and merged their cement units in a monopolistic organization like the Associated Cement Companies (ACC) as well as set up cartel-like organizations like the Indian Sugar Syndicate and a joint syndicate of ACC and the Dalmia Jain group-controlled cement companies. They also joined hands to establish the Employers' Federation of India in 1933. The 1930s was a period of getting closer together as partners for the joint exploitation of India.

Two significant processes were at work at this time. First, the character of British investment in India began to change in the late twenties and in the thirties. Previously the typical foreign investment was small, made by individuals and directed by expatriates through managing agency firms. But these firms -- Andrew Yule, Bird-Heilgers, Jardine Skinner, Ralli Bros, Killick Nixon, Brady and Co., British India Corporation and others -- had served their *main* age-old purpose: that of mediating between metropolitan capital and the Indian market and sources of raw materials. Though they controlled some manufacturing units like jute mills, cotton mills and engineering units, mining companies and tea plantations, they were *chiefly* exporters of jute, jute goods, tea, raw cotton, shellac, etc. and importers of manufactured goods like cotton textiles and yarn, paper, various other consumer goods and machinery.

A change had come over metropolitan capital itself during the inter-war period. Till World War I, Britain's staple industries were cotton textiles, coal, ship-building and iron and steel. Even before the War these British industries, except ship-building, were losing their competitive strength. The supremacy of the first great industrial power of the world was challenged by the U.S.A., Germany, France and Belgium. By the early 1890s, Britain was surpassed by the U.S.A. and Germany in the production of steel, 'the crucial commodity of industrialization'. British industries like cotton textiles relied for their market mainly on the colonies.

British capital had lagged behind the new industrial powers in the formation of monopolies and cartels and the adoption of mass production methods. But during the inter-war period there was increasing concentration and centralization of capital and, as a result, monopoly capitalism developed in Britain. It was the period which saw the rise of giant monopoly firms like Imperial Chemical Industries, Unilever, Guest, Keen and Nettlefold and G.E.C. As Eric Hobsbawm observes, "in 1914 Britain was perhaps the least concentrated of the great industrial economies, and in 1939 one of the most". And while the old industries declined, the new growth industries like electricals, automobiles, aircraft, rayon and silk prospered from about 1924.

Taking advantage of the protection afforded to industries in India, new giant corporations set up their branches and subsidiaries here. As Hobsbawm puts it, "gradually the sun of the old-fashioned rentier was setting" and the sun of the giant transnational was rising.<sup>(48)</sup> The days of the old expatriate managing agencies were numbered. British and other foreign transnationals like ICI, Unilever, Philips, Union Carbide, Metal Box, Guest, Keen and Nettlefold, Dunlop, British Oxygen, Glaxo and Swedish Match established their manufacturing units in India to dominate its industry. By 1947, according to Tomlinson, "about half of British private capital holdings in India was direct foreign investment (DFI) in the subsidiaries of British-based companies.... direct investment (which can be associated with the activities of multinational

enterprises, or MNEs) was mostly in the 'new' industries of chemicals, processed foods, pharmaceuticals, paints and varnishes, and so on." On account of changes in the structure of the British capital and employment markets, the British expatriate sector in India found it difficult to raise new capital and recruit suitable personnel from Britain during the late twenties and thirties, and could hardly respond to the new opportunities that were opening up. It was the "subsidiary companies of British multinational firms, which became the dynamic sector of foreign business enterprise from the 1930s onwards".(49)

Another event of far-reaching importance was taking place. As Britain was no longer the leading capitalist country of the world, the inter-war period marked the beginning of the transition from India's unilateral dependence on Britain to its multilateral dependence on several advanced capitalist countries led by the U.S.A. The process had started: from a monopoly possession of Britain, India was changing into a happy hunting ground of the monopolists of different imperialist countries.(50) It was the humble beginning of a process that was to culminate in every major industrial unit set up in India after the transfer of power in 1947 becoming dependent on the technology and capital from imperialist countries.

The establishment of branches by foreign trans nationals -- the 'India Ltd.s'-- was viewed with suspicion by a section of Indian business magnates during the late thirties. But what they were opposed to was not "the increasing influx into India of foreign-controlled industrial establishments", but the setting-up of *fully-owned* subsidiaries of the powerful transnationals. Already, in 1929, the Tatas had joined a Morgan subsidiary to set up a company to control its three big hydro-electric companies. In the late thirties Walchand Hirachand was inviting U.S. trans nationals to build automobile and aircraft factories in India with him as a collaborator, and the Birlas were exploring chances of collaboration with U.S. (and later, British) automobile giants to set up an automobile plant in India. They knew, as everybody else should know, that advanced technology and capital goods embodying it are the key to power -- the key which the trans nationals possessed and they did not (and do not even today). What they wanted was a stake in the luscious enterprises of the multinationals.(51) Truly, "the 1930s saw the start of a new era, an era which contained the origins of many of the prominent features of post-independence [sic!] India".(52)

In the late twenties and in the thirties the Indian business magnates resented the raj's monetary policy -- pegging the rupee to sterling at the fixed ratio of 1s. 6d, and currency restriction. But, as Markovits observes, "As far as commercial policy is concerned... in the 1930s the strengthening of India's imperial connection proved largely beneficial to its traders and industrialists" and that the positive aspects of the raj's commercial and financial policies -- positive from the point of view of the business magnates -- "tended to overshadow the negative aspects of the currency restriction and financial stringency".(53) And during this period there was closer interweaving of Indian big capital with foreign, especially British, capital than before. Coming events were casting their shadows before.

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5. Arun Joshi, *Lala Shri Ram*, 227.
6. Khushwant Singh and Arun Joshi, *Shri Ram*, 206.

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37. Enclosure to letter from the Oriental News Agency, London, to Thakurdas, 28 July 1933, *Ibid*, File 142 - - emphasis added.

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47. See Suniti Kumar Ghosh, *The Indian Big Bourgeoisie*, 210-11.

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## Chapter Two

### In Quest of Perpetual Friendship

#### *"A New Age Has Begun"*

With the signing of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact in March 1931 Gandhi announced: "An age has passed.... *A new age has begun.*" He declared that while "civil disobedience and jail-going, or direct action was the method to be followed before the settlement, *the way of argument and negotiation takes its place*" after it.(1)

During his negotiations with Irwin Gandhi had confided several times to the Viceroy his hope that "*it would never be necessary at all*" to resume civil disobedience and his resolve "to throw his whole heart and soul into trying to co-operate in constitution-building..."(2) After concluding the pact Gandhi affirmed time and again that he would "strain every nerve to make *absolutely final* what today is provisional" and hoped that *the conflict with the raj would end "for all time"* and that the truce would be *permanent*.(3) So while embarking "on a career of co-operation", he directed his appeals to the princes of the native states as well as to the English. "If India is to come to her own through conference and consultation", he said to them, "the goodwill and active help of Englishmen are absolutely necessary."(4)

Now it was "*perpetual friendship*" he longed for. "*If a permanent settlement*", wrote Gandhi to Walchand Hirachand, "*is the aim of the provisional settlement, as it undoubtedly is, boycott or exclusion, by whatever name we call it, should cease whilst an attempt at perpetual friendship continues.*"(5)

A new age had dawned -- an age when all semblance of direct action was ruled out. "The settlement", he told his audience in Gujarat, "has been made in the hope that what has now to be secured will be done through talks, discussions and negotiations."(6) And he declared: "*Having suspended civil disobedience, we now enter a period of disciplined obedience.*"(7)

What did the Gandhis and Nehrus hope to achieve through discussions and negotiations at the next Round Table Conference with the representatives of the British raj and a crowd of princes, business magnates and various other Indian agents of imperialism -- all hand-picked by the raj? Gandhi had already agreed with Viceroy Irwin that "the scope of the further constitutional discussions" would be confined to considerations of "the scheme for the constitutional government of India discussed at the [first] RTC". Gandhi and the Congress Working Committee had already agreed to the Crown control of defence, external affairs, the position of minorities, emergency situations, an overwhelmingly large part of India's finance and so on.(8)

Besides the 'reservations and safeguards' to ensure the continuity of *direct* imperial rule, there would be the princes, as envisaged by the all-India 'federation', to buttress it. As R.J. Moore writes, even the Indian demand for dominion status was diverted "to the nebulous formula: central responsibility with reservations and safeguards upon the creation of an all-India federation".(9) The "new age" which Gandhi and other Congress leaders looked forward to would confer neither independence nor dominion status but some doses of self-government which would do no harm to the imperial order. What the Congress leaders wanted above everything else was an end to conflict with British imperialism and resolved to stick to the constitutional path, the path of "talks, discussions, and negotiations". The fear of flaming mass discontent or uncontrolled, violent, popular upsurge had persuaded Gandhi to initiate controlled, limited mass actions in 1919, 1920, and 1930 in order to defuse the revolutionary situations, to "sterilize the forces of violence", as he said.(10) But what followed them exceeded the worst fears of the Congress leaders as well as those of the big bourgeois. Sholapur, Peshawar, Chittagong, etc., were pointers. The militant peasant struggles in U.P. and elsewhere were no less disquieting. The Gandhis, wiser after these experiences, wanted to abandon for all time even innocuous satyagrahic mass action and enter an era of co-operation with the British raj.

The most outstanding leaders of the Indian big bourgeoisie -- Sir Purshotamdas Thakurdas and G.D. Birla -- hailed the Gandhi-Irwin agreement as the model to be followed. Thakurdas described it as "a return to



political sanity".(11) Birla, the 'radical nationalist', was more eloquent. "The Irwin-Gandhi Pact", he wrote, "was a great step towards binding India and Great Britain together....*It struck at the roots of the method of securing political advance by means of disorder, and substituted the method of mutual discussion and confidence.*"(12)

Though the big bourgeoisie enthusiastically welcomed the pact, wide sections of the people condemned it as "betrayal". Several provincial Congress Committees like that of Bengal were opposed to it. At their conferences, which were held at the same time as the Karachi session of the Congress, the Workers and Peasants Party and the All-India Youth League denounced it as well as the Congress decision to attend the next RTC. The youth of Bombay "were completely opposed to the peace negotiated by Gandhi". Instead of looking forward to co-operation with imperialism, the Bombay Youth League, at a meeting held in June 1931, exhorted the leaders to 'launch a further campaign of civil disobedience'. The non-communist militant leaders of Bombay's working class, like G.L. Kandalkar, president of the Girni Kamgar Union, who had earlier tried to rally the working class behind the Congress, "denounced the settlement as a betrayal of the interests of the workers and peasants in the sub-continent".(13) In Gujarat, the Patidar peasantry had responded to the call for civil disobedience by refusing to pay land-revenue and were subjected to severe repression. But what broke their morale, according to David Hardiman, was not the official repression but the Gandhi-Irwin Pact. Neither were their confiscated lands restored to them nor was land-revenue halved, as one of Gandhi's 'Eleven Points' had stipulated. "The Patidars therefore considered the pact a betrayal."(14) So did the peasants of coastal Andhra.(15) The reaction was not different elsewhere.

As Gandhi was faced with mounting criticism of the pact, he went on declaring: "The Congress is out to win *purna swaraj* at the earliest possible moment"; "We are pledged to the Lahore resolution"; "The settlement does in no way commit us to a position less than the Lahore resolution".(16) Gandhi seemed to have a unique capacity of equating Crown control over defense, foreign affairs, a large part of finance, internal administration and so on with complete independence, the demand of the Lahore resolution. While this was his *public* stance, he told Irwin *in private* that his goal was not complete independence, not secession from the empire, not the break-up of the empire.(17) He told journalists that "*purna swaraj* would be possible within the British empire...." Then, as if by sleight of hand he caused the empire to disappear and declared: "The Empire no longer remains, it having turned into a Commonwealth, and *swaraj* within the Commonwealth is perfectly possible."(18)

### ***The Hindu-Muslim Problem***

But the road to *purna swaraj* within the empire was not wholly smooth. There were problems ahead. One such problem was differences between the elite Hindus and the elite Muslims.

The imperial strategy of devolution of power by stages killed two birds with one stone. It helped the raj to build collaborative structures at every stage to ensure the security of its vital interests as well as exacerbated the communal conflict and helped to implement its policy of 'divide and rule'. The Congress strategy of attaining its goal by stages "through conferences and consultation", which was intended not to disturb the status quo violently, ideally fitted into the imperial strategy and suited its interests as well as those of the big bourgeoisie, the princes and big landlords. But devolution at every stage was preceded by protracted negotiations between the raj and the elite leaders of the different communities and interests (except the toiling people). The negotiation table -- round or rectangular -- gave rise to violent disunity between the elite leaders, for each section fought for a larger share of the British concessions and tried to rally its co-religionists to add strength to its demands.

In the course of his presidential address to the Cocanada (Kakinada) session of the Congress at the end of 1923 Maulana Mohammed Ali rightly said:

"The adjustment of communal shares in representative institutions, local, provincial and all-India, and in the administration also, give rise to bitter communal dissensions, and here it is clearly impossible to shift the

blame on the masses. Once more personal ambitions, well or ill disguised as communal interests, play a great part..."(19)

Personal ambitions worked havoc only when these were closely interwoven with the interests of certain powerful classes or strata playing for bigger stakes. It was only when highly ambitious individuals became the front-men of these classes that they became strong enough to sway the masses. It is not surprising that in a colonial and semi-feudal society (or societies) the poison of communalism churned up at the top flowed down and infected the ordinary, unsophisticated people of the two communities, whose real interests were the same -- both economic and political -- and were opposed to the interests of the alien rulers and of those whom, ironically, they looked up to and followed as their leaders. This process was initiated and guided by the British imperialists, who "regarded", as Churchill did, "the Hindu-Moslem feud as a bulwark of British rule in India".(20)

Actually two processes were at work -- the process which started from below, the people irrespective of castes and creeds uniting and resisting alien rule and domestic oppression, and the process initiated from above by the elites of the different communities who could not come to a reasonable compromise over their demands, roused communal animosity and disrupted the unity of the people. The upsurge of people's struggles at different times, led by little-known heroes thrown up by the struggles, showed that the people of different communities often united to resist oppression; and that the genuine resistance against foreign and domestic exploiters submerged their communal and caste differences and integrated them with one another. In the absence of a revolutionary party it was the politics of the elite leaders that disrupted their unity.

The solution of the communal problem lay in the lasting revolutionary unity of the people against imperialism and its native allies. Alternatively, there could be an elite-level unity, which, though not a solution of the problem, would not have excited communal passions and diverted anti-imperialist, anti-feudal struggles into the communal channel and carnage. Even such unity remained a mirage.

It appears that Muslim leaders laid the greatest emphasis on the federal character of future India and on the autonomy of the federating units with the residuary powers vested in the units. On the other hand, Congress leaders wanted a unitary India with a strong centre. There lay the crux of their differences. Muslim leaders offered to give up separate electorates not only in 1927(21) but several times afterwards, if this demand of theirs was met.

In *Last Words of Maulana Mohammed Ali*, which he dictated in the form of an open letter to the British Prime Minister just on the eve of his death in London early in January 1931, Mohammed Ali, then a delegate to the first RTC, a former Congress President and Gandhi's erstwhile militant associate, said:

"The small monopolistic caste that desires to remain in control of the destinies of the Hindu community and that being the majority community, of the Indian nation as a whole through it -- is the caste... of the Banya... I am more anxious than any [other] Indian perhaps to get rid of the foreign incubus...of a `nation of shopkeepers' controlling our destinies.... I do not wish to create a home-made incubus of shopkeepers of our own.... To my mind most of the agitation today is being financed and partly for selfish reasons, by the banias of Bombay and Gujarat.... The Mussalmans desire -- and *this is the crux of their 14 points and not separate electorates* -- that *there should be federal government so that the central government with a permanent Hindu majority should not override them everywhere*.... Unless in these few provinces(22) Muslim majorities are established by the new constitution, I submit, not as a threat but as a very humble and friendly warning, there will be civil war in India. Let there be no mistake about that."(23)

In March and April 1931, several Muslim conferences were held. It is significant that, despite differences on other issues, it was the unanimous demand of all these conferences, organized by Congress, pro-Congress as well as anti-Congress Muslim leaders, that the future constitution of India should be federal with full autonomy for the federating units and with residuary powers vested in them. This was the demand of the Council of the All India Muslim League, which met on 15 March 1931. The same demand was raised by the All India Muslim Conference, the All India Shia Political Conference as well as the All India Muslim

Nationalists' Conference -- all held in April 1931. The leading lights of the Muslim Nationalists' Conference were Congress leaders like Dr Ansari, Abbas Tyabji, Dr Syed Mahmud and Tasadduq Sherwani.(24)

Maulana Mohammed Ali or the League looked at this demand for autonomy of the units *from the communal angle*, for the Muslim leaders hoped that the Muslim elite would be able to dominate Muslim-majority provinces, if these were autonomous within a federal India with a weak centre. The Muslim business elite, much weaker than its Hindu and Parsi counterparts, were afraid that it could hardly expect to enjoy a share of power in a unitary India with an overwhelming Hindu majority.

The demand of the Muslim leaders was directed against the Congress leaders' was directed against the Congress leaders' aim of building an autocratic state embracing the whole of India -- the state mainly of Hindu and Parsi big compradors and feudal elements. But the Muslim leaders' demand for provincial autonomy was quite distinct from the incipient demand of the various nationalities of India for autonomy, for the right of every nationality to govern its own affairs and to *decide its own future* -- including whether or not to remain a part of the federation. Such a demand depended for its fulfilment on the abolition of colonial rule and the abolition of feudalism -- anathema both to the Congress and the League. It was colonial rule which had subverted the historical process of the formation of nations in this sub-continent. Provinces of 'British India' and 'native states' were so constituted as to split up nationalities -- Oriya, Telugu, Malayali, Kanarese, Maharashtrian, Gujarati, Rajasthani, Punjabi and so on -- into fragments, tagged to different provinces and 'states', and had subjected them to 'multiple partition'. The Congress leaders' determination to have a strong Centre armed with overriding powers over the provincial units in this multi-national, multi-lingual sub-continent, the home of about one-sixth of the human race, was most pernicious. But the Muslim leaders' demand actually amounted to the demand for domination of Muslim-majority provinces by Muslim compradors and landlords. They trampled underfoot provincial autonomy when Pakistan became a reality and adopted an equally autocratic concentration of powers in the structure of the Pakistani state.

Abul Kalam Azad expressed the fears of the Muslim leadership inside and outside the Congress when he said: "All over the world, the tendency was for the decentralization of power. In a country so vast as India and with people so diverse in language, customs and geographical conditions, a unitary government was obviously most unsuitable. Decentralization of power in a federal government would also help to allay the fears of the minorities".(25)

As it will be seen, it was this struggle for centralization of all powers *versus* decentralization, for a unitary state *versus* a sort of federation that ultimately led to the emergence of Pakistan.

The Nehru Constitution, framed by the Nehrus -- father and son -- and Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru in 1928 and acclaimed by the Congress leaders, envisaged India as a unitary state and empowered the central government to override elected provincial legislatures and ministries and even to dismiss them.(26)

Pestered with the insistent Muslim demand for a federal constitution and autonomy for federating units with residuary powers vested in them, the Congress Working Committee, which met from 7 to 13 July 1931, adopted "a scheme for communal solution", which *inter alia* stated: "The future constitution of the country shall be federal. The residuary powers shall vest in the federating units, *unless, on further examination, it is found to be against the best interests of India.*" This was transparently evasive, rather deceptive, as most of the important resolutions and statements of the Congress leaders were. As the author of the official history of the Congress and Gandhi's long-time associate pointed out, *the mahatma*, "with his usual resourcefulness, added the subjunctive clause, 'unless, on further examination, it is found to be against the best interests of India'".(27) Gandhi's "usual resourcefulness", which helped the Congress leaders to tackle inconvenient situations and won the admiration not only of Sitaramayya but of his other associates, prompted Viceroy Wavell much later to comment that Gandhi was "a consummate master of evasive tactics" and that Gandhi "has brought to a fine art the technique of vagueness and of never making a statement which is not somehow so qualified or worded that he cannot be pinned down to anything definite".(28)

Writing to Dr Syed Mahmud, one of the Congress leaders who had taken a prominent role in the All India Muslim Nationalists' Conference in April 1931, Nehru said: "About the residuary powers vesting in the provinces, I do not agree. This is bound to encourage provincialism..." Nehru was always for a strong Centre, so devoutly wished for by the big Hindu bania, as Mohammed Ali said. Nehru insisted that "We must continue taking a strong line regardless of what others may do". Even the claim for genuine autonomy for the provinces -- not sovereignty and secession -- which a Muslim delegate to the RTC demanded upset Nehru, (29) as it does India's ruling classes even today.

In 1931 the prospect of achieving elite-level unity appeared to Gandhi none too bright. Neither a meeting of the delegates to the second RTC on 21 March 1931, convened by the Viceroy, nor his discussions with Muslim leaders brought them any nearer to a settlement of the rival claims. During his prolonged interview with Home Secretary Emerson from 13 to 16 May 1931, "Gandhi made the suggestion that Lord Irwin might even act as an arbitrator".(30) Gandhi and the Congress leadership would not seek what might be a basis for the solution of the problem but were prepared to entrust the proverbial 'monkey' for finding it out and deciding the fate of the people.

Gandhi's earlier optimism somewhat faded and with the differences between the elite leaders remaining unbridged, he felt quite diffident about attending the RTC.(31) But the Working Committee decided in favour of participation in the conference.

## Chapter Three

### 'Civil Martial Law' and People's Struggles

On entering prison Gandhi felt immense relief as it was for him an opportunity to escape from the turmoil of politics. To him it was an act of "God's infinite mercy", and when Patel and Mahadev Desai joined him, they became, as Gandhi said, "a merry company" and were "practically enjoying ourselves".(1) As we shall see, immediately after arrest, Gandhi, in his appeals to the Viceroy and the Secretary of State, assured them of his co-operation and desire to restore 'peace'.

The people were not as fortunate as their leaders. They found themselves in the midst of a situation for which they had not been prepared. Rather, they had been lulled into complacency when the raj carried out the threat "to hit hard and hit at once". What D.A. Low called "civil martial law" -- martial law under a civil cloak -- was imposed. A bunch of ordinances poured out of the raj's armory to add to those which were already in force in the NWFP, Bengal and U.P. To quote Michael Brecher, "Together they gave the Government of India powers even more far-reaching than those of 1930 which Lord Irwin's biographer had termed 'this catalogue of absolutism'." As Hoare admitted in the House of Commons, they were "very drastic and severe. They cover almost every activity of Indian life". The Congress and various other organizations including peasant associations and youth organizations were banned, large-scale arrests were made. Bans were imposed on political meetings and processions. Every preparation was made to subdue the people by sheer terror. It was an all-out offensive against the people. Samuel Hoare declared that "there would be no drawn battle this time", and adding insult to injury, said: "though the dogs bark, the caravan passes on".(2)

During the phase that started, the people's struggles assumed different forms. Broadly, they were of two categories: 'civil', and what the Congress leaders would describe as 'criminal' and try their utmost to prevent.

Civil resisters hoisted the Congress flag, held meetings, brought out processions, raised slogans, picketed foreign cloth and liquor shops -- all defying the authorities -- and courted imprisonment in large numbers. 'Boycott foreign cloth' was one of the main slogans. In Bombay the closing of markets by traders was another feature. In a few areas non-payment of revenue and rent and *chawkidari* tax was attempted: response varied from area to area. In even fewer areas salt was manufactured.



There were other forms of struggle which were more militant and did not forswear violence. There were also some peasant struggles which were not of the satyagrahic type and were led by people thrown up by those struggles.

Between January 1932 and March 1933 there were as many as 120,000 arrests. Firing on unarmed crowds was also resorted to from time to time. Physical torture and intimidation were used by the government on a wide scale to break the morale of the people. Even army units were posted in villages. Prisoners in jails, even women prisoners, were subjected to inhuman torture. Cases of torture, savage beatings, confiscation of property, loot, rapes of women, killings and so on -- illustrative, not exhaustive -- were documented in the Report of the India League delegation which toured India from 17 August to 7 November 1932 as a fact-finding mission. One of the three members of the delegation was Ellen Wilkinson, a former M.P. In the Preface to the Report Bertrand Russell wrote:

"There has been no lack of interest in the misdeeds of the Nazis in Germany, they have been fully reported in the press, and have been commented on with self-righteous indignation. Few people in England realize that misdeeds quite *as serious* are being perpetrated by the British raj in India."(3)

"To a greater or less degree", wrote Nehru, "all the provinces of India went through this fire of fierce repression, but the Frontier Province and Bengal suffered most."(4)

The NWFP had been in revolt since April 1930. Leaders like Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the 'Frontier Gandhi', were in prison. In their anti-imperialist struggle the Red Shirts and other Pathans showed scant respect for the 'creed' of non-violence. In the late 1920s the Red Shirts organization (which affiliated itself with the Congress in 1931) came in close contact with the Youth League which was under Communist influence. As an official communique issued on 5 May 1930 said, the members of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha propagated communist doctrines in the villages of Peshawar district. In 1930, after the uprising in the Peshawar city was suppressed, members of the Youth League and the Red Shirts carried on wide propaganda among the peasantry and waged guerrilla warfare in the rural areas. Of the British-administered districts of the NWFP, the most turbulent was Bannu.

The British responded with savage repressive measures. Troops, tanks and planes were used to suppress the revolt. Yet the people's resistance grew more determined. The number of the Red Shirts increased from 750 to 25,000 within a short time after the arrest of the leaders. By the end of 1930 there were 54,000 men in prison in that small, sparsely-populated province.(5)

Thousands of Pathans from the tribal areas of the province, which enjoyed some local 'independence' -- the Waziris, the Afridis, etc. --, marched on Peshawar and other administered areas and attacked British posts. The Raj sent machine-guns and tanks to confront them and bombed tribal villages from the air. As the official publication *India in 1930-31* said, it was remarkable that "during the course of their numerous incursions into the settled districts, the tribesmen altogether abstained -- except on two occasions -- from looting in their customary manner the villages they passed through" and, during negotiations with the raj, raised "the demands for the release of Gandhi and the repeal of the special ordinances in India".(6) It is significant that 3 May 1930 was observed in Punjab as 'Peshawar Day' and that a Sikh detachment from Amritsar set out to help the Pathan rebels but was stopped by the British at Jhelum and 200 of its men were arrested.(7)

Again, in 1931-2 the NWFP played a leading role in the no-tax campaign, which spread to wide areas in the province.

Fierce repression could not suppress the revolt of the tribesmen. They were being regularly bombed from the air by the British. It appears from Gandhi's letters to Agatha Harrison and Nehru, written as late as November 1933, that the flames of struggle in the Frontier province had not died down and atrocities were being committed there by the British even then. Gandhi warned Agatha and Nehru that the cases of atrocities should "be dealt with *privately*" and *should not be given publicity*. He said that, since the press was gagged

and censorship was strict, the outside world could hardly know anything of what was happening in the different parts of the country. He, too, did not desire that the people should know these dark deeds of the British rulers. He did not "want any public propaganda", he wrote.(8)

In Bengal, the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggles did not cease when Gandhi called off civil disobedience in March 1931. The Bengal Provincial Conference at Behrampur (Baharampur), Murshidabad, adopted resolutions in 1931 proposing to intensify the no-tax movement, to boycott Union Boards, British goods, British-owned banks, insurance and steamship companies, Anglo-Indian newspapers, etc.(9)

Thanks mainly to Gandhi and G.D.Birla, Gandhi's man on the spot; the Bengal Congress was disorganized when the second phase of the civil disobedience movement opened. Subhas Bose's anti-imperialist, militant activities did not suit the tastes of Gandhi, "the born co-operator", as he often described himself. During his talks with Irwin in February-March 1931, Gandhi had confided to the Viceroy that "*Subhas is my opponent*".(10) Since the beginning of the twenties, Gandhi had been trying to establish his undisputed control over the Congress in Bengal as he did in other provinces -- Gujarat, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Andhra, the Central Provinces and Berar, U.P. and so on -- through his deputies like Vallabhbhai Patel, Prasad, Rajagopalachari, Sitaramayya, Jamnalal Bajaj, Jawaharlal Nehru, etc. Jawaharlal did not belong to the Gandhian core *in words* but followed Gandhi faithfully *in deeds* until 1946. Gandhi was never deceived by his words. His radicalism in words was of help to Gandhi; with his 'left' and 'socialist' rhetoric, as S. Gopal, his biographer and admirer, and many others have noted, he was "the best shield of the Congress against left-wing groups and organizations".(11)

In Bengal there were groups of 'pure' Gandhians and from 1925, after C.R. Das's death, Gandhi tried to set up J.M. Sen Gupta as his deputy in Bengal, whom in spite of the protests of other Congress leaders of Bengal he gave the 'triple crown' -- presidentship of the BPCC, leadership of the Swaraj Party in the Bengal Council, and mayoralty of Calcutta. But neither Sen Gupta, Bidhan Chandra Roy and Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, whom Gandhi cultivated, nor the 'pure' Gandhian groups had that popularity among the masses and ordinary Congressmen that Subhas enjoyed. That was a problem for both British imperialism and Gandhi. The former put Subhas behind bars frequently or forced him to go into exile for a considerable period -- about ten years in jail or in exile between 1921 when Subhas returned after resigning from the ICS and January 1941, when he left India never to return. In September 1931 Gandhi asked Subhas to resign as president of the BPCC on the plea that his resignation would put an end to factionalism within the BPCC. The elected president resigned at the behest of Gandhi, together with several others from the provincial committee, and the Sen Gupta group was put in charge of the Bengal Congress. "But Sen Gupta's group", wrote Nehru to Gandhi on 24 September, "is not acting very graciously".(12) Subhas was removed to prison by the raj on 2 January 1932 before civil disobedience was resumed, as he had been before the first phase of it.

Some Congress leaders of Bengal, close to Gandhi like Bidhan Roy and Nalini Sarkar, and Calcutta-based big bourgeois like G.D. Birla, closest to Gandhi and his associates, did not like civil disobedience to flourish. Bidhan Roy served as mayor of Calcutta during much of the period of civil disobedience. Instead of leading or participating in the struggle, Bidhan hauled down the Congress flag from the Calcutta Corporation's buildings at the dictate of Calcutta's police commissioner. According to K.P. Thomas, "From 1925 onwards Bidhan became an intimate friend of Gandhiji". On 30 January 1932 Gandhi wrote to him: "I love and accept your correction and say with you that we are near to each other..."(13)

Bidhan was also very close to G.D. Birla. Birla, who became president of the All India Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1932, nominated him president of its Bengal branch. In *India during and after the Second World War, 1939-49* (in Russian: Moscow, 1952, p.220), Dyakov observed that Bengal's Chief Minister B.C. Roy was hand in glove with the Central Government because he was a "stooge of the Marwaris".(14)

Nalini Sarkar's role during the civil disobedience struggle was no less patriotic than Bidhan's. As Nehru wrote, Nalini, who then belonged to "the dominant part of the Bengal Congress", which Gandhi had helped to install, "rejoiced to entertain Government officials, Home Members and the like, when most of us were in prison and C.D. was supposed to be flourishing.... The Congress from top to bottom is a caucus and



opportunism triumphs". In July 1934 Sarkar managed to get himself elected as mayor of Calcutta with the support of Government-nominated as well as European councillors of the Calcutta corporation,(15) who were "magnates of Clive Street", the seat of British expatriate capital in India.

But he did not lose the friendship and trust of the top leaders of the Congress. He was very close to G.D. Birla. He was Birla's candidate when he became a member of the Indian Central Banking Inquiry Committee 1929-31.(16) It is quite certain that without Birla's support he could not be elected president of the FICCI in 1933-34

## Chapter Four:

### Abject Surrender and Secret Commitments

#### *Wooing the Raj*

Soon after entering prison, Gandhi appealed to the Viceroy "to reconsider his position" and repeated his request for the fourth time within about a fortnight to allow him to see him. This communication was not even acknowledged. In a letter of 15 January 1932 he wrote to the Secretary of State that he had tried his "best to keep up co-operation but failed in my opinion through no fault of my own". He went on assuring the raj that he would be more delighted than anybody else "to endorse any worthy suggestion for co-operation by the Congress with the Government and the Round Table Conference" and that "by instinct I am a co-operator". In his long cable of 13 November to Lord Sankey, he expressed his deep regret at *the Viceroy not permitting him even a chance to suspend civil disobedience*. Again, he assured Sankey that he was "actually dying for co-operation" and that the Lord "would find 'Gandhi in his pocket' if a genuine gesture of co-operation is forthcoming from the Government side".(1)

Gandhi's British emissaries were also trying their best to promote this spirit of co-operation between the Congress leaders and an intransigent British government. Among them were C.F. Andrews and members of the India Conciliation Group -- Agatha Harrison, Professor Horace Alexander and others.(2) With Gandhi's blessings they were making behind-the-scene approaches to British ministers like Irwin, Sir Samuel Hoare and Ramsay MacDonald. Gandhi was "quite sure that all of you over there are doing your best and *what is proper*".(3)

But neither the appeals nor assurances of the mahatma nor these approaches by his British friends yielded any fruit. *The raj wanted from the Gandhis unqualified surrender and refused to provide them with any fig-leaf of negotiations*. They sought to coerce the Gandhis to give up even their *seemingly* oppositional role and to cast them in a new role -- junior partners in the imperial enterprise of exploitation and oppression. In the critical years that were ahead, they wanted the Congress leaders to assume charge of Indian affairs under their aegis.

Contrary to what the Indian academicians and the Pavlovs say, the Indian big bourgeoisie was no less interested in preventing all conflicts with the raj. As noted before, when, at the invitation of Gandhi and Patel, the Bombay millowners saw Gandhi before his arrest, Sir Homi Mody, Chairman of the Bombay Millowners Association, warned that the civil disobedience movement, if launched, would not have their support.(4) Rather, they rallied to the support of the raj and British capital. Boycott of foreign cloth was one of the key planks of the programme of the civil disobedience movement, but Mody was the architect of the Mody-Lees Pact, which agreed to a lower tariff for Lancashire textiles than that recommended by the Indian Tariff Board. The pact was concluded in 1933 and approved by the Bombay Millowners Association. Purshotamdas Thakurdas attended the third RTC in London, which opened in November 1932, when repression was in full swing, and held that India's salvation "lies in coming to some understanding with British commerce".(5) Thakurdas was doing his best to assure the British raj of Gandhi's devotion to the cause of peace between imperial Britain and colonial India and to restore "friendly relations between the Congress and the government". He pointed out to the Secretary of State in his letter of 4 September 1933

that it looks as if *in substance the difference between the Government and Gandhiji is not fundamental*" and that Gandhi also seeks "the withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience movement".<sup>(6)</sup> While trying to get the civil disobedience movement withdrawn, Thakurdas was anxious to see that the boycott of British firms in cotton trade was removed and to arrange a meeting between leading Indian merchants and big British merchants to end the unsatisfactory state of affairs.<sup>(7)</sup>

After the second phase of civil disobedience movement had opened, G.D. Birla, who has been acclaimed by Bipan Chandra and many others as India's foremost 'nationalist' bourgeois, was pledging loyal co-operation of his own and of the Indian business community to the Secretary of State. On 14 February 1932 Birla wrote to Samuel Hoare: "The best service I can render to my own country as well as to the cause of co-operation [between Britain and India] is to persuade the Federation [FICCI] to officially offer its co-operation.... I shall discuss there [in Calcutta] with Mr Benthall and others the question of closer co-operation between the two communities interested in trade and commerce." Forwarding a copy of a resolution which the Committee of the FICCI adopted at the instance of Birla and Thakurdas, Birla wrote to Hoare on 14 March that *the resolution "definitely commits us to a policy of co-operation"*. He went on to say:

"I always make a distinction between Gandhiji and the Congress, and I again submit that it is possible for you to give us a constitution which, though not acceptable to the Congress, may not be rejected by Gandhiji...*what I want is a permanent peace between the two countries....* I wish I could convert the authorities to the view that *Gandhiji and men of his type are not only friends of India but also friends of Great Britain, and that Gandhiji is the greatest force on the side of peace and order. He alone is responsible for keeping the left wing in India under check. To strengthen his hands is, in my opinion, therefore to strengthen the bond of friendship between the two countries....* Probably the best way to success in this mission [of explaining Gandhi] is to give you our co-operation as far as possible."

He assured Hoare that he could rely on Birla's "humble services" in bringing about happy relations between the imperialist metropolis and the colony. Referring to the Ottawa Conference, Birla said, as we noted in Chapter One, that Thakurdas would be delighted to accept an invitation to represent

Indian trade and commerce at this conference. "We", wrote Birla, "realize the importance of this Conference and *you may rely on our support* in the right direction." Before concluding the letter, the 'radical' Indian 'nationalist' gave Hoare the assurance that *"you will find us always ready to work for the economic interest leaving aside sentiments and politics"*.<sup>(8)</sup>

Similar appeals and assurances Birla conveyed to Lord Lothian, Under-Secretary of State for India in 1931-2, Chairman of the Indian Franchise Committee in 1932 and, later, British ambassador to the USA.<sup>(9)</sup>

As early as July 1923, M.R. Jayakar, then a prominent Congress and Swarajist leader of Maharashtra, observed with some regret:

"The internal control of politics in Gandhi's time is often exercised through the influence of wealth and patronage and a community like the Deccanis, which can boast of no commercial magnates like the Tatas, Birlas and Kasturbhais, cannot possibly control politics from the inside. The influence that such men, by their patronage and capacity to finance, wield over political movements may not be obvious. It is none the less real."<sup>(10)</sup>

What Jayakar wrote from his rich experience was no doubt true. But sometimes the comprador big bourgeois not only employed their funds and exerted behind-the-scene pressures to control Congress politics but played an *active* role in the making and implementation of major Congress policies -- a role little known to the people and ignored by historians. It appears that Gandhi and Birla, who together formed "a unique association" (as Birla claimed), were the two major architects of the new policies which brought about a transformation in the very character of the Congress -- from a party treading from time to time the path of non-co-operation and civil disobedience to a 'parliamentary' party, a Swarajist party of old but with a very important difference. When the Swaraj Party vowed to carry the fight against the raj to the legislative

councils, to put up "uniform, continuous and consistent opposition to the Government" and refuse office to make the Government of India Act of 1919 unworkable, the Congress decided in 1937 to form ministries in as many provinces as it could and work the new British-imposed constitution. Encouraged and applauded by Gandhi, Birla played an active role in bringing about this transition from the politics of non-violent satyagraha to constitutional politics, the politics of collaboration with the raj as an adjunct to the colonial state machinery.

As Birla wrote later, he hated *civil disobedience* or any kind of mass action. He was afraid that "if this psychology continues any Government, even our own, would become an impossibility.... Hence my dread at anything that will lead us towards a mass movement.... Hence my horror at any talk of civil disobedience." <sup>(11)</sup> *His political goal was*, as he wrote to Professor J.M. Keynes on 28 May 1932, "*a decent place in the household of King George the Fifth*" <sup>(12)</sup> -- in other words, self-government within the British empire. He believed that India would attain this goal through negotiations, persuasion and personal contacts and by following the constitutional path, for he held that the British since Macaulay's days were eager that "Indians should progressively learn to govern themselves and do so as soon as they could". As Birla said, he "sought to prevent the growing distrust, which the British in India entertained of Gandhiji's high motives and the passionate distrust which Indians felt in regard not merely to the English in India but towards British statesmen and the British Parliament". <sup>(13)</sup> *What he wanted was that the Congress should abjure mass action for all time*, strictly stick to the constitutional path and rely on negotiations and the 'personal touch' to arrive at the goal. Birla held that the two countries, India and Britain, "by destiny are bound together". <sup>(14)</sup>

In 1932 Gandhi and the Congress leaders entered a blind alley. They were anxious to shirk all conflicts with the raj, yet they were trapped in a conflict. The British imperialists would not allow them to beat an honourable retreat. The raj would not be content with anything less than an unabashed capitulation, that is, withdrawal of the civil disobedience movement without going through the ritual of interviews, talks and negotiations as a face-saving device. In such a situation G.D. Birla took upon himself the task of conciliating the rulers, disabusing their minds about the true intentions of the Congress leaders, making commitments on behalf of Gandhi, and bringing them closer. In his "Foreword" to G.D. Birla's *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, first published in 1953, Rajendra Prasad, then our *Rashtrapati*, commended the book, saying:

"Little, however, is known of what was passing behind the scenes both in Mahatma Gandhi's camp and the Government's. This volume to an extent fills this gap.... One can see from this book how he [Birla] undertook visit after visit to England on his own and utilized the opportunity for keeping those in places of authority there well informed about the way Gandhiji's mind was working. He never claimed to act as an appointed agent on behalf of Gandhiji and yet having studied and understood his philosophy and his programme, he took upon himself the responsibility to convey its implications to those that counted. And it may be said that he succeeded in no small measure in this self-appointed role." <sup>(15)</sup>

The gap to which Prasad referred is also partly filled by the letters and other writings compiled by Birla in the four volumes of *Bapu: A Unique Association* as well as Gandhi's writings published in his *Collected Works*.

In 1932 and subsequent years Birla worked hard to remove the misunderstanding and mistrust between Gandhi and his associates on the one hand and the British colonial rulers on the other. His objects were to put an end to direct action for all time, get the Congress to work the new constitution as "partners in this repression and in the exploitation of our people" (to borrow Nehru's phrase), build an alliance between the raj and the Congress leadership, and to curb the growth of "the left wing", that is, to deal effectively with the oppressed people.

As a true comprador that he was, Birla wrote to Sir Walter Layton on 20 May 1932 that "if I would be dealing entirely with businessmen I should not find any difficulty in convincing them that the *interest of India as well as of Great Britain lay in a friendly and permanent settlement*". As "an Indian who has got a large stake in the country", he yearned for "permanent peace between the two countries" and assured Sir Walter that Gandhi was "as much a friend of Great Britain as of India". <sup>(16)</sup>

In order to conciliate the raj Birla was not only conveying the "implications" of Gandhi's "philosophy" and "programme" to "those that counted" in London but was also wooing leading representatives of expatriate British capital in India like Sir Edward Benthall(17) and the King's deputies in India. In his pursuit after "permanent peace" Birla saw Sir John Anderson within a few days of his arrival and had several interviews with him. Eloquent in praise of the man who came to Bengal trailing clouds of notoriety for his role in the 'Black and Tan' operations in Ireland, he sought his help to persuade the raj to relent. Anderson agreed with Birla that Gandhi "was a most reasonable man and very modest in outlook", of whom Findlater Stewart, Permanent Under-Secretary of State for India, "had spoken to him very highly".(18)

### *The Communal Award*

On 17 August 1932 the 'Communal Award' by the British Prime Minister, who had been invited by the Indian delegates, including Gandhi, to give his award, was announced. As noted before, Gandhi had assured MacDonald that the Congress would abide by his award and would be content with separate electorates for the Muslims and the Sikhs, but would resist if separate electorates or statutory reservation of seats in the legislatures were provided for other minorities. But when MacDonald granted separate electorates not only to the Muslims and the Sikhs but to all other religious minorities including a handful of European expatriates, Gandhi and the other Congress leaders did not utter a single word of protest except in the case of "depressed classes".

The Communal Award gave the Europeans in Bengal and Assam incredibly high representation. In Bengal 14,175 Europeans, forming less than .01 per cent of the population, were awarded 25 seats in a house of 250 -- 10 per cent of the total, while the Muslims constituting 54.8 per cent of the population were allotted 119 seats -- 47.6 per cent of the total seats -- and the Hindus, forming 44.8 per cent of the population, 80 seats, no more than 32 per cent.

As regards communal representation, the Communal Award was manifestly unjust especially to the Hindus but also to the Muslims. In Punjab, too, the Muslims, though the majority community, were given less than half the number of seats.

Gandhi went on a fast on the issue of separate electorate for the depressed classes but he and the other Congress leaders swallowed the rest of the Communal Award on the specious plea that they were out to reject the entire Government of India Act of 1935. Though they claimed to represent all classes and all communities, they did not oppose British imperialism's deliberate policy to split the Indian people on the communal basis in order to perpetuate their rule. The resistance to only one provision of the Communal Award clearly shows that, while claiming to fight for independence, they submitted to the imperial policy of 'divide and rule' and were eager to participate in constitutional politics on the basis laid down by British imperialism.

It was obvious that a handful of Europeans, non-nationals dominating India's trade, commerce, industry, plantations, banking, etc., were given fantastic representation so that they might *directly* exercise sinister influence on Bengal's politics, which was conducive to the interest of the big compradors like Birla. It was in the interest of the big Marwari compradors based in Calcutta, with whose compatriot agents the urban and rural markets of Bengal and Assam were honeycombed, that the Congress leaders did not make even a whimper of protest against this representation of the Europeans in Bengal and Assam.

Long before, at the Delhi Congress session in 1918, C.R.Das had spoken in support of a resolution which stated:

"That the non-official Europeans should not be allowed to form separate electorates...and if they are allowed such representation it should be limited to their proportion compared to the population of the provinces concerned."

But all this was ignored by other eminent Congress leaders -- then as well as later.(19)

Lying on his death-bed early in January 1931, Maulana Mohammed Ali, too, strongly opposed the principle of giving any weightage to the Europeans in Bengal.(20)

At the Congress session in 1934, both Hindu and Muslim delegates from Bengal raised objections to the over-representation of the Europeans in Bengal, but in vain.(21)

The Congress leaders broke their silence over this issue about fourteen years after the announcement of the Communal Award. In about mid-1946, when the British Cabinet Mission announced its plan about the future constitutional set-up in India, the Congress came out in sharp denunciation of the European representation. They were afraid that the Europeans in Bengal and Assam Assemblies voting in the elections to the proposed Constituent Assembly might affect its composition to the detriment of their interests. Nehru rhetorically asked what did the "tremendous over-representation [of the Europeans] in Bengal and Assam signify except the patent fact that a colonial economy has been translated into the political sphere". Gandhi said:

"Till now they had used their vote to uphold the British power and acted as a wedge between the Hindus and the Mussalmans."

He belatedly questioned their right "to be in the Assemblies at all".(22) Gandhi and Nehru were quite right when they accused the Europeans of acting "as a wedge between the Hindus and Mussalmans" of Bengal and of helping to strangle "the dumb millions". In fact, the Europeans could play this role since the inauguration of the Government of India Act 1935 because the Congress policy was complementary to theirs. We shall return to this point later. It may be noted here that the Congress leaders had no objection to the Europeans continuing to play the same role in Bengal and Assam. In his letter of 14 June 1946 to Viceroy Wavell, Congress president Abul Kalam Azad made it explicit that they objected *only* to the British "participating in and influencing the elections to the constituent assembly".(23)

### ***Gandhi's Fast and Opening of the Harijan Front***

On 18 August 1932, the day after the announcement of MacDonald's Communal Award, Gandhi wrote to him that unless his government revised its decision in respect of separate electorates for the depressed classes, he would go on fast from 20 September. As he confided to his associates, Patel and Mahadev Desai, he felt worried that "the separate electorate will create division among Hindus so much that it will lead to bloodshed. *Untouchable hooligans will make common cause with Muslim hooligans and kill caste Hindus.*"(24) The Muslims were already alienated from the Congress; Gandhi could hardly permit the 'untouchables' to break away from the Hindu or Congress fold. To avert the disaster the mahatma decided to undertake a fast.

It was Gandhi's public stance that separate electorate for the depressed classes would erect a wall between them and the caste Hindus and be destructive of the Hindu religion. Replying to Gandhi, MacDonald contended that under the government's scheme no wall of separation would arise and the unity of the Hindu community would in no way be impaired. Under the scheme the depressed classes would remain a part of the Hindu community and vote in the general Hindu constituencies. The scheme proposed to create only a small number of special constituencies in seven provinces, from which the depressed classes, despised by the upper castes, might return members of their own choosing to the legislatures "to voice their grievances and ideals", besides voting in the general Hindu constituencies.

Gandhi replied: "Without arguing I affirm that for me this matter is one of pure religion." So the supreme leader of India's 'freedom' struggle resolved to go on a fast to put pressure on the British raj to withdraw a provision in a constitution then under preparation by the raj for enforcement in colonial India -- not on the issue of national freedom, which would see the end of colonial slavery and all British-made constitutions, and for which the civil disobedience movement is supposed to have been launched.



It had been announced by MacDonald that any alternative scheme mutually agreed upon by the caste Hindus and the depressed classes would be accepted.

Before embarking on his fast at God's call, Gandhi did not spare his efforts to organize public opinion so that he might not have "to carry the fast to its logical end".<sup>(25)</sup> On 18 September, two days before the fast began, G.D. Birla, Thakurdas, Sir Chunilal Mehta (Bombay's bullion king and Thakurdas's cousin), Mathuradas Vasanji -- all business magnates -- had seen Gandhi in prison "to sound Gandhi on some sort of compromise on a system of joint electorates with the reservation of seats".<sup>(26)</sup> The mahatma's fast put the required pressure on B.R. Ambedkar and other leaders of the depressed classes to arrive at a settlement, which was immediately endorsed by the British raj. Though the mahatma had been opposed in London to both separate electorates and reservation of seats for the minorities except the Muslims and the Sikhs, the compromise that was achieved, known as the 'Poona Pact', provided for reservation of seats for the depressed classes as well as a modified form of separate electorate for them. Under it there would be a primary round of elections in which the members of the depressed classes alone would participate to send up a panel of depressed class candidates *for the reserved seats*, who would have to face a mixed electorate of caste Hindus and depressed classes for final election; and there was a considerable increase in the number of reserved seats for them from what had been granted by MacDonald -- from 81 seats in the whole of India to 148. G.D. Birla played a leading part in arranging the settlement and bringing the fast to a happy end. The 'Poona Pact' was signed, among others, by the two Birla brothers (Ghanshyamdas and Rameswardas), Thakurdas, Sir Lallubhai Samaldas, Sir C.V. Mehta, Walchand Hirachand (all tycoons), besides Malaviya, Ambedkar, Rajendra Prasad, Rajagopalachari, Sapru, Jayakar and Devdas Gandhi.<sup>(27)</sup> Perhaps Bengal, where the scheduled castes were allotted 30 seats, was represented by G.D. Birla.

When the fast had commenced, Nehru, sitting in prison, noted in his diary: "...was not his [Gandhi's] action a recognition and in part an acceptance of the Communal Award and the general scheme of things as sponsored by the Government?... was there not danger of our movement trailing off into something insignificant after so much sacrifice and brave endurance?" He criticized Gandhi's religious approach to a political question and frequent references to God. "What a terrible example to set!" he commented.

But, as usual, the "emotional crisis" was soon over and when the news came of the settlement he was ecstatic in praise of Gandhi and his action. "*By his fast*", wrote Nehru, "*he has changed the face of India and killed untouchability at a blow.*"<sup>(28)</sup>

Whether untouchability was killed or not, the civil disobedience movement was killed with this blow. Immediately on ending his fast Gandhi declared in a press statement: "None would be more delighted than I would be to endorse any worthy suggestion for co-operation by the Congress with the Government and the Round Table Conference." He promised that "when the proper time comes, I should throw the whole of my weight in favour of co-operation".<sup>(29)</sup>

The Harijan Sevak Sangh was formed with G.D. Birla as its all-India president. Birla was authorized to nominate the presidents of the provincial boards. "Centralization [of powers in the Sangh] was insisted upon by Sheth Ghanshyamdas Birla and Shri Amritlal Thakkar [the nominated general secretary] for the decisive reason that money was found by the Centre... and the policy was also evolved by the Central Board." Gandhi coined a new name, 'Harijan' -- God's own man -- for a member of the depressed classes -- 'the untouchable'. The Harijan Sevak Sangh became an exclusively caste Hindu organization after the resignation of Ambedkar and another 'Harijan' from the Central Board for, the Sangh, as Gandhi argued, was intended to expiate the sin of the caste Hindus and there was hardly any room for 'Harijans' in it.<sup>(30)</sup>

A campaign was started for opening the doors of Hindu temples to the 'untouchables': Gandhi himself was leading it from within the prison, all facilities for which were generously provided by New Delhi's Mussolini and his men. In February 1933 *Harijan*, an English weekly, was started as Gandhi's mouthpiece and was followed in quick succession by several language editions -- Hindi (with Birla Mills, Delhi, as its address), Bengali, Gujarati and Tamil.



When Ambedkar was asked for a message for *Harijan*, he refused to give any, saying: "The outcaste is a by-product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. And nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system."[\(31\)](#) But the mahatma was among the most eloquent defenders of the *hereditary* caste system -- the *varnashrama* -- minus the later proliferations of castes and sub-castes. "If abolition of castes", wrote Gandhi, "means the abolition of *varna* I do not approve of it."[\(32\)](#)

The untouchables were and are mostly scavengers, leather-workers, poor or landless peasants, often bond slaves of caste Hindu or other landowners. This section of the most wretched on earth had and still has in many rural areas to perform various social obligations to caste Hindus, crippling and most degrading. In some areas landlords and their sons abuse their women sexually, with impunity. The leaders of the untouchables were not much interested in temple entry. What they were interested in was improvement in their social, economic and political status. Ambedkar told Gandhi in October 1932 "that I have no interest in the temples being thrown open, common dinners and the like, because we suffer thereby.... I only want that social and economic hardships should end".[\(33\)](#) Ambedkar was right when he said that "it is a mistake to suppose that it [untouchability] is only a religious system.... It is also an economic system which is worse than slavery.... History shows that where ethics and economics come in conflict, victory is always with economics."[\(34\)](#)

But the mahatma was opposed to any change in the social and economic status quo. He extolled the occupation of scavengers as "a holy profession" and their services as indispensable, and advised them "to be conscious of the dignity of your profession, to learn to practise it [disposal of night-soil] in a clean manner". His "ideal Bhangi" [scavenger] was one who would approach his profession "only as a sacred duty... would not dream of amassing wealth out of it"(!) and "would consider himself responsible for the proper removal and disposal of all the dirt and night-soil within the area which he serves and regard the maintenance of healthy and sanitary condition within the same as the *summum bonum* of his existence". The mahatma wanted the 'untouchables' to continue as helots but better helots with improved knowledge of their work and greater devotion to their "sacred duty" -- more contented, cleaner, and free from weaknesses like drinking and meat-eating, for which he often upbraided them. He said: "I would, therefore, suggest to reformers that they should not persuade Bhangis and Chamars to leave their occupation but they should, on the contrary, give them proper knowledge about their work."[\(35\)](#) "Under Gandhism", said Ambedkar, "the Untouchables are to be eternal scavengers."[\(36\)](#) In June 1936 the Adi-Karnataka Sangh deputation told Gandhi that it was no use concentrating on temple-entry when Harijans' economic and social conditions badly needed improvement. The leader of the deputation said to him that "instead of devising means to help them you are devising new means to keep them down".[\(37\)](#)

It was Gandhi's injunction during the temple-entry movement that the untouchables should not "seek to force entry into the orthodox temples *even through the method of satyagraha*". The privilege of entering them should be a gift of the caste Hindus.[\(38\)](#)

It appears that the mahatma's temple-entry agitation was intended to kill several birds with one stone.

First, it was expected to divert attention from the basic social and economic issues. The social and economic problems which, if raised, might do harm to the semi-feudal social structure, were swept under a religious carpet. One of the main problems was the problem of landlessness or near-landlessness of the 'untouchables'. If any attempt was made to tackle this problem, the very roots of feudalism or semi-feudalism would be shaken. So the concrete realities of life were meant to be obscured by the religious outpourings about 'sin' and 'penance' and 'sacred duty' and so on. The entire movement sought to maintain the social and economic status quo by appealing to the good sense of the dominant castes and classes to curb the grosser manifestations of the caste system. Even these the movement failed to eradicate. Despite the brave declarations of Gandhi and Nehru, made quite frequently before and after the campaign, that "Untouchability is on its last legs"[\(39\)](#), or untouchability has been "killed at one blow", the actual results were far from encouraging. In March 1946, after a long campaign of many years, Gandhi was informed by the Gujarat Harijan Sevak Sangh that in his home-province "apart from Karadi nowhere are temples open to

Harijans, and nowhere may they use public wells". A few weeks before his death he said that the Harijans' conditions had become worse than during British rule.(40)

Second, the political situation in the early thirties demanded that Gandhi should step up the campaign against untouchability and for temple-entry. The Muslims were already alienated from the Congress; the representatives of the depressed classes had been asking for separate representation from as early as 1917;(41) during the Round Table Conference in 1931 a Minorities Pact had emerged and the depressed classes were also granted some separate constituencies under the MacDonald award. Years before, Gandhi had drawn the lesson from the Moplah revolt in 1921 that "If we do not wake up betimes, we shall find a similar tragedy(42) enacted by all the submerged classes. The 'untouchables' and all the so-called semi-savage tribes will presently bear witness to our wrongs against them if we do not do penance and render tardy justice to them".(43) Besides, conversion of his 'Harijans' to Christianity or Islam posed a problem. To quote Ram Gopal, "In the competition for the 'untouchables' between Muslim leaders and the Hindu Mahasabha (which may be considered as including all other movements like the Arya Samaj, the Shuddhi Sabha, etc.), the Muslims were winning all along the line;... whatever the motive, they indeed were the pioneers to focus attention on the plight of the depressed classes."(44) Gandhi was afraid of the danger of the "poor Harijans [who] have no mind, no intelligence, no sense of difference between God and no-God", some of whom were according to him, "worse than cows in understanding", might be enticed by the "Christian Missions" and "Mussalmans and others" to leave the Hindu fold and swell their numbers. While he admonished the Christian missionaries and Muslims for converting the untouchables to their faiths, he warned the caste Hindus: "So long as the poison of untouchability remains in the Hindu body, it will be liable to attacks from outside."(45)

Though Gandhi denied it, many people held that the purpose of the anti-untouchability movement was "to secure domination of a consolidated Hindu majority, overwhelming all minorities by its numbers".(46)

The stepping-up of the movement was particularly necessary when constitutional changes were in the offing. These impending changes, as Gyanendra Pandey wrote, "inspired some of the institutional arrangements within the Congress in the early 1930s, particularly those connected with the establishment of a Harijan Sevak Sangh and the launching of a concerted Harijan programme". The campaign against untouchability, to quote Gyanendra Pandey again, "brought rich dividends to the Congress, especially in elections".(47)

The third bird that Gandhi's fast and the anti-untouchability movement killed was the civil disobedience movement. As noted before, the government allowed him all facilities of interview, correspondence, etc., to lead his campaign from within the prison. Interestingly, when the struggle for freedom from British rule was on, its supreme leader was busy soliciting the support of the Viceroy and other high officials for temple-entry bills which would remove legal obstacles for the trustees of Hindu temples to open them to the depressed classes. Subhas was right when he said: "As the year [1932] came to a close... resolutions were being passed from many a platform, at the instance of the Congress leaders, asking the Viceroy to accord sanction to the Temple Entry Bills in the Madras Legislative Council and the Indian Legislative Assembly. Civil Disobedience indeed!"(48)

The Viceroy informed the Secretary of State on 1 November 1932: "We think... there may be definite advantages in getting Gandhi involved in untouchability. It will rouse strong feelings on both sides and will divert attention from strictly political issues and Civil Disobedience." "The interest of many Congress workers", declared Secretary of State Hoare with considerable satisfaction, "has now been diverted to Mr Gandhi's campaign against untouchability."(49)

An article in the *Communist International* correctly put it: "The Congress, hiding behind the 'struggle' for the abolition of the pariah system, is preparing the ground for adopting the constitution worked out by British imperialism. Thus the National Congress is literally repeating the manoeuvre which it carried out in 1922."(50)

### *Formal Withdrawal of Civil Disobedience*

G.D. Birla had a long interview with Gandhi in prison after the fast was over. Birla informed Hoare that Gandhi gave him "a clear indication that he was himself very eager to see peace restored and also promised that if I came back with permission to talk these matters he would give me something in writing".<sup>(51)</sup>

A little earlier, in July 1932, Birla was trying to arrange an interview between Anderson and Gandhi. Though Anderson was quite willing, it did not come off. The raj wanted Gandhi's capitulation -- total and unqualified -- without the figleaf of an interview and negotiation. The raj knew that the Congress leaders were panting to accept the dose of self-government that the new constitution it was drafting would give them and it refused to oblige Gandhi. Nothing availed -- neither Gandhi's own appeals and assurances of co-operation, nor the behind-the-scene approaches of his Indian and British intermediaries, nor the fast, nor the Harijan movement. The ice refused to melt.

On 17 March 1933 the White Paper on Indian Constitutional Reforms, an outline of the constitution then in the making, was issued by the British Government. The mahatma, driven into a corner, received "God's peremptory command"; "the voice became insistent". "At half past twelve came the clear, unmistakable voice: 'you must undertake the fast'." So he announced on 30 April 1933 that he would go on another fast -- a fast for three weeks -- from 8 May. He informed the Home Secretary, Government of India, that the "reasons [were] wholly unconnected with Government and solely connected with Harijan movement".<sup>(52)</sup>

Immediately after the commencement of the fast on 8 May, the Government released him "in view of the nature of the object of the fast and the attitude of mind which it disclosed" -- a possibility which Gandhi had anticipated beforehand.<sup>(53)</sup> He repaired to the textile magnate Sir Vithaldas Thackersey's mansion at Pune to carry on his fast, which prompted Verrier Elwin to remark wryly: "Gandhi fasting to death in a marble palace is like Jesus Christ going to crucifixion in a Rolls-Royce."<sup>(54)</sup>

On the same day -- 8 May -- Gandhi issued a press statement condemning "the secrecy that has attended the [civil disobedience] movement". Pitying the "civil resisters [who] would be in a state of terrible suspense during the next three weeks", he asked acting Congress president M.S. Aney (who was afterwards appointed a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council) "to officially declare suspension [of the movement] for full one month or even six weeks". And, while assuring the raj of his co-operation, if he survived the ordeal, he made an appeal for the release of "all the civil resisters".<sup>(55)</sup>

In a communique issued on 9 May, the Government of India stated that the civil disobedience prisoners would not be released unless the movement was unconditionally withdrawn; and that it had "no intention of negotiating with the Congress for a withdrawal of the civil disobedience movement or of releasing prisoners with a view to arrive at any settlement".<sup>(56)</sup>

As usual, Gandhi did not think of observing democratic norms in getting the country-wide movement suspended for six weeks. His "comprehension of the difficulties of the Government" was truly remarkable. He always decried secret methods adopted by political workers when all open political work, except rendering support to the raj, was banned. But he never hesitated to carry on secret negotiations, directly or through intermediaries, with British imperialists and making secret commitments to them and getting the Congress to fulfill them. More of it later.

The suspension of the movement provoked Subhas Bose and V.J. Patel to issue a statement from Vienna (where Subhas had gone for treatment of tuberculosis of which he was a victim). The statement said: "The events of the last thirteen years have demonstrated that a political warfare based on the principle of maximum suffering for ourselves and minimum suffering for our opponents cannot possibly lead to success." It criticized the suspension as "a confession of failure" and called "for a radical reorganization of the Congress on a new principle and with a new method", for "a change of leadership" and, if necessary, for a new party within the Congress, "composed of all radical elements".<sup>(57)</sup>

Nehru reacted to the suspension by noting in his prison diary that it had come as "A shock -- and then a willing acceptance of the fact..." He wrote:

"As I watched the emotional upheaval during the fast I wondered more and more if this was the right method in politics. It is sheer revivalism and clear thinking has not a ghost of a chance against it.... His [Gandhi's] continual references to God irritate me exceedingly.... *more and more I realize the gulf between Bapu and me* and I begin to doubt if this way of faith is the right way to train a nation.... *And then I cannot understand how he can accept, as he seems to do, the present social order; how he surrounds himself with men who are the pillars and the beneficiaries of this order.... How can we get anything worthwhile with these people as our hangers-on? No doubt they will profit and take advantage of both our movement and of any constitutional changes that may come....* I want to break from this lot completely..."(58)

This was one of Nehru's passing moods. As usual, discretion would soon prove to be the better part of his ideological and political valour; as usual, he would sacrifice his better feelings at the altar of his towering ambition; as before, he would accept "the present social order" and prove to be one of its ablest and staunchest bulwarks. He, too, would surround himself with the same, or the same type of, hangers-on as Gandhi, and while Gandhi invoked religion, he would, as before, invoke his non-violent 'socialism' -- 'socialism' without tears -- for the same end.

The fast went off well and, soon after it ended, Gandhi's son Devdas was married with Rajagopalachari's daughter Lakshmi in the Thackerseys' marble palace amidst rejoicings.

On 1 June, immediately after the fast was over, Gandhi confided his desire to Rajagopalachari to seek an interview with the Viceroy. Rajagopalachari said: "But they say we should go to them only after first completely withdrawing civil disobedience.... Then the mass struggle comes to an end." "*That exactly is going to be the key to the whole affair*", replied Gandhi.(59)

Yet there was no favourable response from the raj, for which Gandhi was pining. Writing to Andrews, who, besides other British friends, was contacting British ministers, he sounded a note of dejection and yet hoped that the work Andrews and the others were doing "will tell in the end". He promised that there was "no danger on this side of any precipitate action". Gandhi wired to Agatha Harrison that he would seek an interview with the Viceroy when his health permitted and that "for my part there will be no condition".(60) (These letters and cables, no doubt, passed through the official censorship, yet the raj remained deaf to all pleas.)

In June civil disobedience was suspended for another six weeks. In his prison diary Nehru wrote: "Civil Disobedience again suspended for six weeks -- to end of July! And *among the mighty ones so deciding was G.D. Birla!* Heigh ho! This is a funny world and not an easy place to live in."(61) Nehru might be right but this again was a fleeting mood, so usual with him.

On 12 and 14 July a meeting of select Congress leaders convened by Gandhi and Aney, was held at Pune. Mass civil disobedience was withdrawn while Gandhi retained the right of offering individual civil disobedience -- the fig-leaf. He sought an interview with the Viceroy to reach "*an honourable settlement*".(62) He was informed that unless civil disobedience was completely withdrawn, no interview would be granted. He repeated his request and assured the Viceroy: "I hanker for real peace...."(63) Yet there was no real change in the heart of New Delhi's Mussolini.

## Chapter Five:

### "Partners in this Repression and in the Exploitation of our People"

#### *The "Central Authority" and Congress Ministries*

Out of the election battle of 1937 the Congress emerged with 711 out of 1,585 seats in the provincial assemblies, mainly from the 'general', that is, Hindu constituencies. It did badly in Muslim constituencies; contesting only 58 out of 485 Muslim seats, it obtained 26, about 17 of them from the NWFP. It did not win a single Muslim seat in eight out of eleven provinces.

The Muslim League, which organized its election machinery rather late, did not fare well; it won only 108 seats.

The Congress obtained an absolute majority in Madras, C.P., U.P., Bihar and Orissa and a near majority in Bombay. In July 1937 the interim ministries which had assumed office in April resigned and Congress ministries were formed in Bombay, Madras, U.P., Bihar, Orissa and C.P. By September 1938 the Congress assumed office either by itself or as part of coalition in the NWFP, Sind and Assam.

While permitting acceptance of office in the provinces where the Congress commanded a majority, the Working Committee warned that Congressmen in other provinces should not accept office. Again, at its meeting held in August 1937, the Committee stated that a minority Congress party in a provincial assembly could co-operate with other groups in the assembly without sacrificing Congress principles but warned against making commitments regarding the possible formation of a ministry to which the Congress was a party.<sup>(1)</sup> But opportunism triumphed while forming ministries in provinces like Sind and Assam. In Punjab, where the Unionist Party dominated by landlords -- Muslim, Hindu and Sikh -- was in office, the Congress, a negligible minority in the assembly, had no chance of forming a ministry. Bengal's case was different. Of that, later.

The ultimate selection of Congress candidates for the elections was made by a Congress Parliamentary Sub-Committee with Patel as president. The sub-committee also supervised the election campaign. There were allegations that "candidates had been chosen in such a manner that only the right-wing had found their way into the list, and that the whole plan was to find men who were rich, would endorse the constitution and accept office when the time came". This sub-committee with two other members -- Prasad and Azad -- had the task of guiding the flock of Congress ministers and all legislature parties. "The arrangement between the Congress ministries and the Parliamentary Sub-Committee", writes Shankardass, "was that the former had to do the bidding of the latter in everything.... The Parliamentary Sub-committee had the power to choose the cabinet in each Congress province."<sup>(2)</sup>

In an article on the Functions of the Working Committee in *Harijan* of 6 August 1938, Gandhi stated that the purpose of the Congress was "to fight the greatest imperialist power living". So, like an army, "*it ceases to be democratic. The central authority possesses plenary powers enabling it to impose and enforce discipline on the various units working under it.* Provincial organizations and Provincial Parliamentary Boards are subject to the central authority." *What was expected, he said, was "unquestioned obedience"*. This claim of "fighting the greatest imperialist power living" was a ploy to justify the dictatorial methods and practices of the Congress leaders. Gandhi added: "The Ministers are mere puppets so far as the real control is concerned." The CSP was not wrong when it accused the Working Committee of "assuming the role of a Fascist Grand Council".<sup>(3)</sup>

The choice of the leader of the Bombay Assembly Congress Party, who would be Bombay's Prime Minister, showed that truth and justice were casualties so far as "the central authority" was concerned. On 3 March 1937, before the AICC met and adopted the conditional office acceptance resolution, Patel had a meeting with K. M. Munshi, who was close to Gandhi and became Bombay's Home Minister, and discussed



ministry-formation in Bombay. They decided to nominate B. G. Kher, Munshi's friend, for prime ministership. Unaware of this secret development, the Congress legislators from Maharashtra, the largest provincial contingent of the Bombay Assembly Congress Party, met informally and recommended the name of K. F. Nariman, the president of the Bombay PCC, as the leader of the party. When this news appeared in the press on 9 March, Patel manipulated the election of Kher as the leader at a meeting of the party.(4) When this was known there was an outburst of resentment in Bombay. Summoned by the Working Committee, Nariman accused Patel of influencing the election while Patel claimed to be innocent. Gandhi himself took up cudgels on behalf of Patel. On 21 June he wrote to Patel: "It seems Nariman will fall into the pit he is digging himself." As usual, Nehru mounted the high horse of moral indignation, certified that Patel was blameless and shouted down Nariman at the meeting of the Working Committee. The Committee adopted disciplinary measures against Nariman, who resigned as president of the Bombay PCC. Azad wrote later : "We all know that truth had been sacrificed in order to satisfy Sardar Patel's communal demands [Nariman was a Parsi]."(5)

### *Towards Pakistan*

The ministry-formation led to a development which had far-reaching impact on the history of this sub-continent. In 1936 and 1937, until the formation of Congress ministries, Jinnah and the Muslim League leaders were strongly in favour of a close alliance with the Congress, and their statements, resolutions and approaches were quite conciliatory and friendly. As regards the goal and the means of achieving it, there were actually no differences between the Congress and the League. To quote S. Gopal, "the Congress no longer claimed to be a revolutionary organization and there was no difference on that score between it and the League." The social and economic programmes presented in their election manifestos in 1936 were quite similar.(6)

Before the election in 1937, the Congress did not expect to win a majority of seats in the U.P. legislature; the two parties co-operated with each other and there was a tacit understanding between them that they would form a coalition after the elections. Pattabhi Sitaramayya stated that in U.P. Congress and League leaders had even co-operated "in the selection of candidates". When, after the elections, the Congress leaders for reasons of their own did not immediately accept office, the leader of the League Assembly Party in Bombay, under Jinnah's instruction, rejected the Bombay Governor's invitation to form a ministry. A Leaguer who joined the interim ministry in U.P. was expelled from the League. When a Muslim constituency from which a Leaguer had been elected fell vacant, the U.P. Muslim League left the seat uncontested in favour of a Congress Muslim, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai. Jinnah and the League wanted what he called 'a united front' of Congress and League. In a press statement soon after the election, Jinnah affirmed that "nobody will welcome an honourable settlement between the Hindus and the Muslims more than I, and nobody will be more ready to help it", and he made a public appeal to Gandhi to take the lead. Jinnah declared that the League was willing to work with any other group or party in the legislatures on the basis of an agreed programme. It was prepared to fight for the country's freedom and wanted full self-government for its people.(7)

Jinnah wanted Congress-League coalition ministries, particularly in Bombay and U.P., where the Congress had set up very few candidates to contest from Muslim constituencies and was defeated in each of them. When the Congress "agreed to accept office", writes K. M. Munshi, "Jinnah told me...that 'we'(Congress and the Muslim League) should work together. I promised to convey his wishes to Sardar [Patel] and Gandhiji, which I did. I understood at the time that Jinnah had a similar discussion with [B.G.] Kher." Munshi says that Jinnah also formally approached Patel and Azad through Sir Cowasji Jehangir.(8) But the Congress leaders wanted absorption, not alliance or 'united front': they insisted that the Muslim Leaguers must resign from the League, join the Congress and abide by its discipline in order to become ministers. Jinnah, writes Kanji Dwarkadas, "wanted to co-operate with the Congress Ministry but not by liquidating and sabotaging his own party".(9)

Acknowledging Jinnah's message through B.G. Kher, proposing a Congress-League coalition ministry in Bombay, Gandhi, in his letter of 22 May 1937 to Jinnah, pleaded utter helplessness as he saw "no daylight



out of the impenetrable darkness and in such distress" he cried out "to God for light".<sup>(10)</sup> The prayer remained unanswered and Jinnah's message was lost in that darkness.

In U.P., Nehru agreed to include two Muslim League MLAs in the Congress ministry provided the League dissolved the League Assembly Party and its members joined the Congress Party, accepting its programme, policy and discipline *in toto*, liquidated the U.P. Muslim League Parliamentary Board and promised not to put up League candidates in by-elections in future and so on -- "pretty stringent conditions", as Nehru himself described them. What the Nehrus wanted was not a coalition with the League but wholesale defection from the League -- its peaceful, voluntary liquidation as the price for two ministerial posts. According to Nehru, when the U.P. League leaders "made an approach to the Congress" for formation of a coalition ministry, "They pointed out that last March their parliamentary board had offered co-operation to the U.P. Congress party on the basis of the 'Wardha Programme' as laid down by the [Congress] Working Committee, and were prepared to work under the discipline of the Congress Party". U.P. League leader Khaliqzaman "agreed to all the conditions except two: the winding up of the parliamentary board and not to set up separate candidates at by-elections.... In effect, he pointed out, this might happen anyhow." Nehru refused to "alter our previous conditions at all; if they were accepted *in toto* we would agree, not otherwise". Khaliqzaman's suggestion to defer the question for a few days was not accepted.<sup>(11)</sup>

It appears that the Congress, which had been rejected by the Muslims in the elections in the whole of India except in the NWFP, was seeking to establish itself among them by buying over their elected representatives. Whether this move was ethical or not, it was the Congress leaders' aspiration to become the sole heir to the British raj and monopolize power in a future self-governing India that stood in the way of the formation of a coalition with the League even on the basis of a Congress programme. The result was disastrous for the people of India. K. M. Munshi, the Congress stalwart, called it "the beginning of the end of United India". This view was shared by many others including Azad, who laid the blame on Nehru.<sup>(12)</sup> But the policy was not Nehru's alone but that of the entire leadership.

This refusal of the Congress leaders to form a coalition with the League and share whatever little power the British raj had conceded convinced the Muslim leaders that they could not hope to enjoy a share of power in a unitary Indian State with an overwhelming Hindu majority, except as camp-followers of the Congress leaders. Later, Viceroy Wavell said: "Pakistan was the creation of the Congress, for it was the refusal to establish Coalition Governments in the Provinces that alarmed the Muslims and drove them to extremes." Thus V.P. Menon, who became India's Reforms Commissioner and afterwards Patel's right-hand man, wrote in July 1945:

"Thanks to the Congress policy of excluding all the other parties from the Provincial Executive, the minorities learnt that the majority in the legislature could set at nought the wishes of the minorities and that representation in the legislatures would not alone be a sufficient safeguard. This was the real motive power behind Jinnah's cry of Pakistan. Exclusion from a share in the power was the real foundation on which the present position of the Muslim League was built up."<sup>(13)</sup>

To equate the Western parliamentary system with the spurious one introduced by the British in India where conditions were entirely different, and to justify Congress refusal to form a coalition with any other party where the Congress was in a majority is quite wrong. Among other things, it may be noted that Congress Assembly parties and ministries did not function according to the principles of the parliamentary system in a bourgeois democratic country like Britain. Here the assembly parties and the ministries were responsible not to the assembly parties but to the High Command. Shankardass writes:

"Sometimes the ministers [of Bombay] found the constant supervision irksome, and they complained to the Governor, *who in most cases was their confidant* .... They did nevertheless accept the dictates of the High Command, for being out of favour with the High Command meant a speedy political death such as that brought upon Nariman."<sup>(14)</sup>

Secondly, and more importantly, separate electorates and reservation of seats for religious communities made majorities and minorities unchangeable, in the absence of a revolutionary party which was capable of uniting the different communities. If the principle of majority rule was applied inflexibly, it would mean, as Ram Gopal put it, "on the benches of the ruling Party sat all Hindus [and a few members of the minority communities who had cast their lot with them] and on the opposition benches sat all Muslims; the peculiarity consisted in the fact that the opposition could never hope to replace the ruling Party."<sup>(15)</sup> The reverse was true in a Muslim-majority province like Bengal.

### *Towards Dismemberment of Bengal*

In Bengal the Congress had not contested a single Muslim seat in 1937. In the absence of a coalition with some other party on the basis of a programme, the Congress, which was identified as a party representing the Hindus, would always remain in the opposition and there would be a perpetual Muslim ministry dependent on European votes. This would, instead of bridging the communal divide, make it many times wider and communalism would vitiate the atmosphere. This was exactly what happened because of the policies pursued by the Congress high command, and laid the basis of the dismemberment of Bengal.

At its meeting in March 1937 the Working Committee "decided that any Congressman accepting office in any province where the Congress had failed to get the majority made himself liable to disciplinary action". In an interview to the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on 10 July 1937, Nehru, then Congress president, said:

"The plain meaning of the Wardha resolution [of the CWC on 7 July] is that *only* the Congress parties with a majority in the provincial assemblies are entitled to form ministries from among their own members."

Meeting in August, the Working Committee heard Congress representatives from Bengal, Punjab and Sind, and warned the minority Congress parties in these provinces "against making commitments regarding the possible formation of a ministry to which the Congress is a party".<sup>(16)</sup>

In Bengal the Congress won 54 seats; the Tripura Krishak Samiti with 5 Muslim MLAs merged with the Congress; the total strength of the Congress increased to 60. Of the Muslim seats, 39 went to the League and 36 to the Krishak Praja Party (KPP), though the latter polled more votes than the former. Independent Muslims won 43 seats and many of them joined either the League or the KPP after the election. The strength of the League rose to 60 and that of the KPP to 59.

The KPP with a sprinkling of Hindu members was predominantly a Muslim organization with a non-communal approach to political and social issues. It believed in the principles of liberal democracy and constitutional action, represented mainly *jotedar* interests, was widely popular among Muslim peasants, and had some influence on *Namashudra* (scheduled caste) peasants. Its election manifesto demanded, among other things, the abolition of zamindari without compensation, reduction of rent, relief to peasants from the burden of indebtedness, full autonomy for Bengal, repeal of all repressive laws, and release of all political prisoners.<sup>(17)</sup> The "Aims and Objects and Programme" of the KPP included, besides other things, "immediate steps for the fixing of a minimum price of raw jute" -- Bengal's main commercial crop. This item and full autonomy for Bengal were distasteful to the Calcutta-based big compradors, particularly the Marwaris, with whose agents the jute centres in Bengal were honeycombed. To them it was a very profitable pastime to depress the price of raw jute.<sup>(18)</sup>

The task of reviving the Muslim League in Bengal was entrusted by Jinnah in 1936 to up-country Calcutta-based Muslim compradors like the Ispahanis, the Siddiquis and the Adamjis. Jinnah wooed Fazlul Huq, the leader of the KPP, but the talks broke down on the issues like the abolition of zamindari without compensation, the KPP's right to maintain its separate identity, and its right to contest general (that is, Hindu) seats, to which Jinnah refused to agree. Fazlul Huq accused the non-Bengali Muslim businessmen of Calcutta of seeking to dominate the destiny of the Bengali Muslims.<sup>(19)</sup>

In a statement to the press, Fazlul Huq said that "all talks of Muslim unity and solidarity" were "worse than useless", for more than 90 percent of Bengali Muslims were cultivators on whose labour the others feasted and that there was "no difference whatever between the Hindus and Mussalmans, for their interests are welded into one another, together they stand and together, we are confident, they shall triumph".<sup>(20)</sup>

During the election battle, the Congress lent its support to the KPP. To quote Ayesha Jalal,

"The Congress and the Krishak Praja had an unwritten agreement not to poach on each other's territory, and this worked to the electoral advantage of both."

Speaking of Fazlul Huq in a postscript to his *Autobiography*, added in 1941, Nehru stated that "even in organizing this party [KPP], he expressed his friendliness to the Congress. I remember his coming to see me, during a visit of mine to Calcutta prior to the elections, and telling me that he and his party were wholeheartedly for the Congress."<sup>(21)</sup>

Negotiations started between the Bengal Congress and the KPP for a coalition between the two parties, the prospects of which seemed bright. Many unattached MLAs were willing to support the Congress if it formed a ministry in coalition with the KPP. According to Abul Mansur Ahmed, the talks failed because the Bengal Congress refused to agree to his proposal to give precedence to the amendment to the Tenancy Act and the passing of a Moneylenders' Act over the release of political prisoners. The real reasons were different, of which Mansur might have been unaware.

To quote Gallagher,

"for a while, members of all the factions, such as J. C. Gupta, B. C. Roy, Sarat Bose and T. C. Goswami, could hope to take office in alliance with the Muslim-Namasudra party of Fazlul Haq (Nalinaksha Sanyal to Nehru, 20 February 1937; File E5/840 of 1937, AICC Papers). But the Working Committee would not hear of it (F.N. 144, AICC Papers .... Nehru directed that in Bengal the Congress should not negotiate for membership of any coalition.) 'The Praja Party members headed by Maulavi Fazlul Huq begged of the Congress members to form a coalition with them.... Due to Congress decision we were unable to accede to their request'. (J. C. Gupta to Jawaharlal Nehru, 14 Aug. 1937, File P 5/868 of 1937, AICC Papers)."

Humayun Kabir, a leading member of the KPP at the time, afterwards its general secretary and, still later, in the sixties, a minister of the Indian government, regretted that

*"In Bengal Mr. Fazlul Huq pleaded and pleaded in vain for active co-operation or even tacit support. Forced into the arms of the Muslim League, he did perhaps more than anybody else in India to restore the prestige of the League and win for it support among the masses of the land."*<sup>(22)</sup>

Nalini Sarkar, close to Birla, served as the link between the KPP and the Muslim League and in his house the League-KPP alliance was formed. He became the Finance Minister in the League-KPP Coalition Ministry and, though expelled from the Congress, his cordial relations with Gandhi remained unimpaired.

The ministry was formed with Fazlul Huq as the Prime Minister, but six out of eleven ministers were zamindars. The KPP's programme of abolition of zamindari and the fixation of a minimum price for raw jute, on which the lives of millions of Bengali peasants depended, had to be shelved. Big up-country Muslim compradors such as the Ispahanis and Adamjis, like their Hindu counterparts, the Birlas, came to play a key role in Bengal's politics. The ministry became dependent also on the support of the British expatriate capitalists. To quote Omkar Goswami,

"Not only did half a dozen ministers (including Nalini Sarkar, Nazimuddin and H. S. Suhrawardy) depend on jute mill interests in varying degrees but the Government's very existence depended on support from the European group in the Legislative Assembly, for which any price was worth paying. In fact, the degree of patronage was strong enough for Benthall to remark, 'What a powerful position we have with the

Government.... In fact, if we work things rightly I believe they would adopt any policy that we liked to press on them'." [\(23\)](#)

There were revolts within the KPP. Throughout 1938 there were attempts to form a coalition between the Congress, the KPP rebels and some others. Congress leaders of Bengal and rebel KPP leaders pleaded and pleaded in vain for the high command's permission. But Gandhi and the Congress Working Committee would not be persuaded. On 18 March 1938, 20 MLAs and MLCs of the KPP met Gandhi and intimated to him "their desire to see the political situation in Bengal changed and their readiness to work in co-operation with the Congress Party in the legislature if the administration of the Province was run on purely national lines and on an economic basis". Gandhi refused to "be drawn into local politics". It was reported in the press on 5 April that the leaders of the Independent Praja Party (a breakaway group from the KPP), the KPP (another breakaway group led by the former general secretary of the united KPP, Shamsuddin Ahmed), and the Scheduled Caste Party had an interview with Subhas Bose, then Congress president. A written statement proposing a coalition was submitted to the Congress Working Committee, and Shamsuddin Ahmed and two comrades of his met the Committee on invitation. On the same day Birla and Nalini Sarkar had "another interview" with Gandhi. The Committee rejected the proposal. [\(24\)](#)

Nirad C. Chaudhuri, who was Sarat Bose's private secretary and who also handled much of Subhas's correspondence, wrote that "the Congress high command, more especially Mahatma Gandhi, strongly opposed this move" at different times from the autumn of 1937 to break up the League-Huq alliance and to form a Congress-KPP coalition. [\(25\)](#)

When Subhas made another attempt in October 1938, Gandhi at first gave his approval. But Birla, Azad and Nalini Sarkar saw him at his *ashram* and he changed his mind. Withdrawing his consent in a letter of 18 December to Subhas marked "strictly confidential", Gandhi wrote that "the best way of securing comparative purity of administration and continuity of a settled programme and policy would be to aim at having all the reforms that we desire carried out by the present ministry". He advised Subhas that the ministry's proposed amendment to introduce separate electorates in place of joint electorate for Calcutta Corporation elections should be supported. The Calcutta municipal amendment bill was intended to serve the interests of the Ispahanis and Siddiquis, who controlled the Calcutta District Muslim League, and of British expatriate capitalists.

Later, Nirad Chaudhuri told Leonard Gordon that "Bose felt that...G. D. Birla was interfering. Bose was said to feel that *Birla feared Hindu-Muslim unity in Bengal because this would adversely affect Marwari economic domination of Calcutta....*In Mr Chaudhuri's opinion, Gandhi acted knowingly in the Marwari interest because he was against Bose personally and against Bengali interests (other than those of his men in Bengal)." [\(26\)](#)

A copy of Gandhi's letter was sent to Birla as copies of all such letters were. Writing to Gandhi's secretary Pyarelal on 25 December, Birla said:

"Please inform Bapu that *at the request of Nalini I gave him also a copy of Bapu's letter to Subhas*. Of course, I told him to treat it as *strictly confidential* and he promised to do so. *He told me that he might have to show that copy in confidence to Lord Brabourne...* and I left the matter to his discretion." [\(27\)](#)

The handing over of a copy of Gandhi's "strictly confidential" letter addressed to Congress president Subhas on a very serious issue to Nalini, which Nalini "in his discretion" might show to Bengal Governor Brabourne, is quite revealing. Like many such facts, it points to the Gandhi-Birla-British raj nexus. Though Birla was the main conduit, there were many others of the type.

Interestingly, Nehru, who was the best defender of Congress ministries, criticized Subhas's move to form a coalition ministry in Bengal as "a rightist step". In reply to Nehru's charge, Subhas wrote :



"If you scrap the policy of office acceptance for the whole country, I shall welcome it.... the proposal of a Coalition Ministry arises because the active struggle for Purna Swaraj has been suspended. Resume this struggle tomorrow and all talk of a Coalition Ministry will vanish into thin air."(28)

Subhas held that under the circumstances a Congress-KPP coalition ministry was necessary to stop the spread of communalism in Bengal.

The Congress leaders' ban on the Bengal Congress Assembly Party's coalition with the KPP proved ominous for Bengal. It resulted in two things, both pernicious. First, it drove many of the secular-minded and progressive Muslims into the arms of communal and reactionary Muslim leaders. The KPP gradually disintegrated. Fazlul Huq became the president of the Bengal Muslim League and a member of the Working Committee of the AIML and provided the League with a mass base in Bengal. Second, it forced the Hindus represented by the Congress to remain in permanent opposition to a Muslim alliance, which formed the government. This gave rise to the politics of confrontation between the two major communities in place of confrontation between the people and British imperialism. As Ram Gopal put it, the Huq-League alliance "was an event of outstanding importance. A Congress-Praja Party coalition would have put itself on a road to Hindu-Muslim understanding; the Praja Party's merger with the League made the Ministry almost wholly communal and gave communalism a foothold to expand." So did the KPP leader Mansur lament that Bengal's politics, if not India's, would have assumed a different character if the Congress had co-operated with the Praja Party.(29) It may be noted that a ban of this kind was not imposed in Sind or Assam, where the Congress Assembly Parties were in the minority.

During this time Birla was after partitioning India and dismembering Bengal and Punjab on a religious basis. On 11 January 1938, more than two years before the Muslim League demanded the partition of India on a religious basis, Birla had pleaded for it. In a letter of that date to Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's secretary, he wrote:

"I wonder why it should not be possible to have two Federations, one of Muslims and another of Hindus. The Muslim Federation may be composed of all the provinces or portions of the provinces which contain more than two-thirds Muslim population and the Indian states like Kashmir.... if anything is going to check our progress, it is the Hindu-Muslim question --not the Englishman, but our own internal quarrels."(30)

Muslim leaders had dismissed Chowdhury Rehmat Ali's 'Pakistan' scheme, first proposed in 1933, as "chimerical". The Joint Parliamentary Committee was told by a Muslim delegation in 1934 that Pakistan was "a student's scheme which no responsible people had put forward". Several other schemes were proposed in the thirties, but most of them, like Mohammed Iqbal's in 1930, envisaged grouping of Muslim provinces in North-Western India within an Indian federation or confederation. But at the Sind Provincial League Conference, held in October 1938, Sir Abdulla Haroon, Chairman of the Reception Committee and a big comprador merchant, proposed in his speech the division of India into separate Hindu and Muslim federations and incorporated his proposal in a draft resolution. It is reported that Jinnah opposed this move and references to the division of India were dropped.(31)

In December 1939, Birla had only one solution to offer to Stafford Cripps: "*separate Hindu and Muslim nations*, with the cession of districts and appropriate population movements, followed, perhaps, by a loose federation holding the minimum powers necessary". But the League's general secretary Liaquat Ali Khan proposed to Cripps three alternatives: partition; free sovereign states, with Hindu and Muslim federations, and a confederation; and Dominion status for each province with a federal government exercising such powers as the provinces chose to cede, subject to their right to opt out.(32) More of this later.

### ***The Sole Heir to the British Raj***

As noted before, Gandhi began to insist in London in 1931 that the Congress represented all communities and all classes in India and was capable of delivering the goods, and wanted the British Government to settle



the Indian problem with the Congress *alone*. The same message he sent to Lord Lothian on 20 January 1938. At a meeting of the Gandhi Seva Sangh on 25 March 1938 Gandhi said:

"There will be only one power in India with whom they [the British] can discuss matters, and that power will be the Congress."

In *Harijan* of 6 August 1938 Gandhi wrote that "the Governors must recognize the Congress as *the one national organization that is bound some day or other to replace the British Government*".

Gandhi stated in *Harijan* of 3 December 1938:

"It is surely in their [the Princes'] interest to cultivate friendly relations with *an organization [Congress] which bids fair in the future, not very distant, to replace the Paramount Power, let me hope, by friendly arrangement.*"

In an interview in December 1938 with H. V. Hodson, Gandhi laid down the law that "*so far as the political programme is concerned*" *there could exist no other party in India* and that "For religious and social activity, of course, every community can have its separate organizations".<sup>(33)</sup>

If Gandhi could, he would not allow any other political party representing communities or classes to exist. This totalitarian claim was the same as that of the fascists of Europe.

Nehru did not lag behind. In May 1936 he said: "The Congress represents *all people* and *all views* in the country." He continued to speak and write in the same vein.<sup>(34)</sup> He claimed that there were *only "two forces" or "two parties"* -- the Congress and the British raj -- and that "Intermediate groups, whatever virtue they may possess, fade out or line up with one of the principal forces".<sup>(35)</sup>

How reasonable was the Congress leaders' claim that the Congress represented all classes and communities? The claim was a spurious one. First, representing as they did the interests of the big compradors, landlords and princes, they were hostile to the interests of the workers and peasants. Second, the claim that they represented all communities was disproved by facts. As noted before, the Congress won only 28 seats out of 485 Muslim seats in the whole of India in the elections to the provincial assemblies in 1937. Its influence on the scheduled castes was far from what the Congress leaders claimed. B. R. Ambedkar hurriedly knocked together an Independent Labour Party in Bombay a few months before the elections and his party won 13 out of 15 seats reserved for the scheduled castes in Bombay, though its resources were nothing compared with those of the Congress. According to Ambedkar, the seats won by the Congress with a majority of scheduled caste votes were only 38 out of 151 reserved for scheduled castes in India. He said that "the results of 1937 Election conclusively disprove the Congress claim to represent the Untouchables". The Congress organization itself was overwhelmingly Hindu. In 1936, out of 143 members of the AICC only six were Muslims -- 3 from the NWFP, 1 from Bihar and 1 from U.P. and the sixth member, Abdul Kalam Azad, sat in the committee as a former Congress president.<sup>(36)</sup>

It appears that, rhetoric apart, the Congress leaders did not themselves hold that the Congress represented the entire Indian people. On 25 March 1938 Gandhi said to a Gandhi Seva Sangh meeting:

"Today, we have power neither over the Princes, nor over the zamindars, neither over the Muslims nor over the Sikhs."

Kripalani said: "As for the Muslims, their hatred of Congressmen exceeds their hatred of Hindus."

On 28 March Gandhi said that the Congress

"got many Muslims enrolled as members. But they had to be coaxed into becoming members. This is a kind of flattery, or you may call it a *politically motivated policy*. We maintained friendly relations [with the Muslims] merely from a practical point of view: it was like a businessman's practical policy".

At a meeting of the Congress Working Committee Nehru observed that "the Mussalmans had absolutely no trust in him [Gandhi] and considered him their enemy".

On 31 August 1937 Birla, the great benefactor of the Congress and Congress leaders, wrote to Gandhi:

"The Congress is without doubt a party enjoying mass support, but it is essentially a Hindu Party..."(37)

## Chapter Six:

### The CPI and its Role in the Thirties (till the outbreak of World War II)

The arrests of March 1929 were a staggering blow to the CPI. With the leaders in the Meerut prison the party split into a few groups in different cities, among whom there was little co-ordination.

The Bombay group, which included S.V. Deshpande, B.T. Ranadive and Mrs Nambiar formed the 'Young Workers' League' and published the *Workers Weekly*. This group which controlled some big trade unions like the Girni Kamgar Union and the G.I.P. Railwaymen's Union, issued a call, against the opposition of non-communists, for a general strike of the textile workers from about the end of April in order to fight the offensive of the employers --rationalization, wage-cuts, intensified work, retrenchment, etc. Though the workers responded to the call, the strike, which lasted several weeks, eventually failed, for the problem before the millowners during those days of almost world-wide economic crisis was not how to produce but how to sell accumulated stocks. A few other strikes called by the communists in Bombay were also unsuccessful. Gradually, the communists lost control of the powerful trade unions like the Girni Kamgar Union and the G.I.P. Railwaymen's Union to the Royists and others. After his expulsion from the Comintern towards the end of 1929, M.N. Roy sent a few emissaries to India who started work in the trade unions before his arrival in December 1930. Bombay's small communist group broke up into two quarrelling factions, one led by Deshpande and the other by Ranadive.

In Bengal the communists continued to work under the banner of the Workers and Peasants Party for some time, brought out communist literature and led strikes in jute mills and other industrial strikes in 1929, some of which ended in partial victory. They tried to assist in the defence of the Meerut prisoners and maintain contact with the Communist International. Calcutta communists also were divided into groups. In 1931 Abdul Halim, Somnath Lahiri, Ranen Sen and a few others formed the 'Calcutta Committee of the Communist Party of India'. Factionalism outside was being encouraged by the communist prisoners in the Meerut jail, who themselves were divided into factions. They expelled Dange from the party for his anti-party activities. In 1931 Ranadive formed a party of his own -- the Bolshevik Party.

At the Nagpur session of the AITUC, held towards the end of 1929, the communists, supported by other militant trade unionists, pushed through the Executive some resolutions of a radical nature like the resolutions boycotting the Royal Commission on Labour (the Whitley Commission), rejecting the proposal to send delegates to the International Labour Organization (ILO), affiliating the AITUC to the League Against Imperialism and the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, rejecting the Nehru Report, etc. The trade union leaders like N.M. Joshi, B. Shiva Rao, V.V.Giri and Dewan Chaman Lal -- many of whom were pro-British and some the millowners' men -- left the AITUC to form the Indian Trade Union Federation. Deshpande became the general secretary of the AITUC and Subhas Bose its president. At about the middle of 1929, N.M. Joshi told Albert Thomas of the ILO that the 'Moscow influence' on the imagination of the workers was on the rise and that absolute priority should be given to measures to fight it out.(1)

At the next congress of the AITUC, there was a further split. The communists lost to the Royists and their allies and left the organization to found the Red Trade Union Congress.

The years 1930 to 1932 witnessed an upsurge of struggles -- the civil disobedience movement, the peasant struggles in various provinces of India, the uprising of the Sholapur workers who established their own regime for a few days, the heroic struggles of the people of the NWFP, the Chittagong uprising followed by death-defying struggles of national revolutionaries and so on.(2) But the communist leaders -- the Ranadives and others -- engaged in squabbles among themselves, remained aloof from the struggles of the people, from the Congress-led civil disobedience movement as well as the peasant struggles.

Previously, without losing their independence, without serving as an appendage of the Congress leadership, the communists had worked within the Congress. It is the communist delegates who moved or supported at successive Congress sessions in the twenties resolutions defining the Congress goal as independence outside the imperialist framework, only to be rejected by the Congress leadership in most of the years. When the first phase of civil disobedience opened in 1930, the communists tried in places to turn the struggle into a genuine anti-imperialist one and appealed to so-called leftist leaders like Nehru to support the move.(3) But they met with opposition from the Congress machinery, which, in Bombay for instance, organized anti-communist campaigns among the industrial workers.(4) The Congress opposition to their activities, the Congress leaders' real indifference (in spite of temporary spectacular moves by them)(5) to the arrests of communists in March 1929 and so on convinced the communists that the Congress-sponsored civil disobedience was no better than a manoeuvre for wresting not freedom but some minor concessions from the raj for themselves. Muzaffar Ahmad, one of the Meerut accused, has written that the Congress leaders communicated their advice to them through Jawaharlal that they should plead guilty to the charge of having conspired "to deprive the King-Emperor of his sovereignty" (instead of challenging that sovereignty itself) and escape with light punishment.(6)

Attempts were made by communists in late 1930 to hold an all-India conference of all genuine anti-imperialists and build an "Anti-Imperialist League" -- the "Revolutionary Anti-Imperialist United Front of the Toiling Masses of India". The appeal convening the conference correctly said:

"Behind this [a revolutionary] mask the capitalist Congress leadership is pursuing unhampered its efforts to strike a bargain with imperialism."

But what was wrong was that the communists did not participate in the struggles the peasants, the workers and the petty bourgeoisie were waging.

An important document of this period was "Draft Platform of Action of the C.P. of India", which appeared in *Imprecor (International Press Correspondence)*, organ of the Communist International (Comintern), in December 1930.

The document pointed out :

"An agrarian revolution against British capitalism and landlordism must be the basis for the revolutionary emancipation of India."

This bourgeois democratic revolution in India, which included the overthrow of British rule, could be led not by the bourgeoisie but by the working class. To fulfil this task it was immediately necessary to build a "united, mass, underground Communist Party". According to this document, the main domestic enemies of the Indian people were the native princes, the landlords and the native bourgeoisie. It stated:

"Linked up as it is with the system of landlordism and usury, and terrified at the thought of revolutionary insurrection by the toiling masses, the capitalist class has long ago betrayed the struggle for the independence of the country and the radical solution of the agrarian problem. Its present 'opposition' represents merely manoeuvres with British imperialism, calculated to swindle the mass of the toilers and at

the same time to secure the best possible terms of compromise with the British robbers. The assistance granted to British imperialism by the capitalist class and its political organization, the National Congress, takes the shape at the present time of a consistent policy of compromise with British imperialism at the expense of the people, it takes the form of the disorganization of the revolutionary struggle against the native States, the system of landlordism and the reinforced exploitation, jointly with the imperialists, of the mass of the people, of the working class in particular."

*The "Draft" upheld the right of the nationalities of India to self-determination including the right to secede.* One of the tasks of the CPI would be to fight "for the complete social, economic and legal equality of women". The CPI would also organize revolutionary work among the soldiers and ex-soldiers. The "Draft" asserted that "Only the ruthless abolition of the caste system in its reformed, Gandhi-ist variety, only the agrarian revolution and the violent overthrow of British rule, will lead to the complete, social, economic, cultural and legal emancipation of the working pariah and slaves" and called upon them to join the united revolutionary front. It sharply exposed Gandhism and its role in Indian politics.

This document, which made many correct formulations, was not free from left-sectarian weaknesses characteristic of the period. Among some of its weaknesses were its failure to comprehend that the colonial bourgeoisie was divided into two sections: comprador and national; its inability to distinguish between the genuine left wing and the pseudo-left wing (represented by leaders like Nehru) of the Congress; its failure to envisage that the liberation of India, a sub-continent where social, economic and political development was very uneven, could not be achieved through what it called "a general national armed insurrection".

The "Draft Platform" became the CPI's programme in the early thirties.

In "Manifesto on the Round Table Conference" published in February 1931 and "the Karachi Congress and the Struggle against Imperialism", a pamphlet distributed at the Karachi Congress in March, the CPI unmasked the treachery of the Congress leaders and issued calls to the rank and file of the Congress to desert it to "join a revolutionary anti-imperialist united front of Indian workers and peasants". In July 1932 an "Open Letter to the Indian Communists" from the Central Committees of the Communist Parties of China, Great Britain and Germany regretted that "the Communist Party [of India] still consists of a small number (though the number is increasing) of weak groups, often isolated from the masses, disconnected with each other..." It upbraided the Indian communists for standing "aside from the mass movement against British imperialism". "A distinction", it said, "must be made between the bourgeois Congress leadership and those sections of the workers, peasants and revolutionary elements of the town petty-bourgeoisie, who, not understanding the treacherous character of the Indian National Congress, followed it, correctly seeing the *basis* of their slavery in the domination of British imperialism". It advised the Indian communists to form an all-India party, break their isolation, lead the 'no-rent and no-tax' movement which the peasants themselves had been waging, organize the workers and other toiling people. "Communists", it said, "must *always* take part in them [reformist trade unions] and carry on work among the workers, urging them to join the united fighting front of the proletariat."[\(7\)](#)

Again, another "Open letter to the Indian Communists from the C.C. of the C.P. of China" appeared in *Imprecator* in November 1933. Like the earlier one, this, too, was quite a long one. It advised the Indian communists that "the chief and decisive question is the formation of a militant *mass Indian Communist Party*" (emphasis in the original). It said that while the "Indian bourgeoisie, which stopped the civil disobedience campaign and continues its capitulatory policy, clears the path for the rule of British imperialism" and when "ever wider sections of the toilers are turning their eyes towards the path of the revolutionary struggle against the imperialists and feudalists", "*the rapid formation of the Communist Party is the central task of the Indian revolution*" (emphasis in the original). Like the open letter from the Central Committees of the three parties, this letter also upheld the "Draft Platform of Action" of 1930 and affirmed that "the task of Communists is *to enter and take charge of all these democratic movements* (emphasis in the original), of all movements of discontent against the existing order, whatever questions cause them to arise, and to go everywhere with Communist agitation,...constantly explaining and showing in practice that the path of the national reformists is the path of defeat and slavery". While preserving the independent class

character of the Communist Party, it should strive to "create the *united front of workers, peasants and urban petty-bourgeoisie* (emphasis in the original), utilize any temporary allies, carrying [on] the struggle for leadership of the national movement for independence, land and freedom". It said that it would be "wrong to counterpose the anti-imperialist to the strike struggle" of the workers, that it would be "necessary to conduct both at the same time.... Even while organizing political strikes it is necessary, along with anti-imperialist and other political slogans, to put forward economic demands which are close and vital for all the workers, including the most backward strata of the working class. It is necessary to begin serious work in the reformist trade unions and every kind of mass reformist organization, with the aim of winning over to our side the masses who are in these organizations." Continuing, it advised the Indian Communists to "*develop the movement for the non-payment of rent and taxes*", to "*create peasant committees and committees of struggle, supporting and extending the partisan struggle*". By carrying out these tasks, it will not be difficult for you in the future to rouse the struggle of the peasant masses to a higher level, to the level of the agrarian and anti-imperialist revolution which will sweep away the rule of the hated British imperialism along with feudalism". Emphasizing the importance of a consistent exposure of the entire policy and action of the National Congress and the national reformists, who were eagerly waiting to work the new "feudal imperialist constitution" British imperialism would impose, it pointed out: "The victory of the Indian people will be impossible unless the masses are liberated from the influence and leadership of the national-reformists, unless an independent Communist Party is formed and leads the struggle of the entire people." Before it concluded, it said: "We are entering a new period of revolutions and wars." (8)

Another very important document of this period is "The General Statement of the Eighteen Communist Accused" before the Additional Sessions Judge, Meerut. (9) This remarkable document, after clarifying the ideological position of the accused, dwelt on the stranglehold of British imperialism over India, gave an analysis of Indian society and problems, the conditions and roles of different classes, the ways of solving the problems, formulated the tasks of the Indian communists and so on. Despite its limitations, it is a major Marxist work that has appeared in India. Its main formulations about the stage of the Indian revolution, its character and the roles of the different classes in it, the character and role of Gandhism, the tasks of the communists, etc., are in the main correct. This document rightly points out:

"Only those sections of the population, chiefly the princes and the landlord class, and *those upper sections of the bourgeoisie and professional classes whose interests are closely bound up with the imperialist machine, which profit from the imperialist connection, must support Imperialism and can be considered definitely counter-revolutionary.*" (10)

It emphasized that "the agrarian revolution has been and remains the axis of the national revolution". (10a)

The extremely severe sentences passed on the Meerut prisoners by the Sessions Court were reduced on appeal by the Allahabad High Court. Like Romain Rolland's denunciation (11), the savage sentences had invited world-wide condemnation and as Michael Brecher writes, "The sentences were reduced later under the pressure of the British Trade Union Congress and others". (12) The process of reorganization of the CPI was helped with the release of several Meerut prisoners. In December 1933 several communists including Gangadhar Adhikari, Patkar, P.C. Joshi and some comrades of Bengal, Punjab and the Central Provinces met in Calcutta and formed the 'nucleus' of the Provisional Central Committee of the CPI. Adhikari became the temporary secretary. The meeting also adopted a political resolution and a new constitution.

The nucleus of the Provisional Central Committee tried to build up a united Communist Party and made arrangements to hold an all-India Party Convention. This convention, a more representative meeting, was held in March 1934. At this meeting a Draft of Political Thesis which was based on "The Draft Platform of Action" was adopted. (13)

The "Thesis" regretted the mistake committed during the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-1, when the communists had "objectively isolated themselves from the struggle of the masses" and resolved to correct this sectarian deviation. It said that while exposing the policies of the Congress leadership, including its left wing, the communists would "use the Congress platform and systematically combat the Congress reformism



and its 'Left' varieties". It criticized the slogan of 'Constituent Assembly' under the British aegis, a slogan first raised by M.N. Roy and then taken up by Nehru and the Congress, as a "reformist slogan" intended to divert the people from the anti-imperialist struggle. Referring to the Harijan movement, it stated that "The problem of the untouchables, who are for the most part landless labourers and semi-serfs, cannot be radically solved until imperialism and landlordism and all remnants of feudalism are overthrown". It gave a call for building the Anti-Imperialist League -- a "United anti-imperialist front under Proletarian Leadership". The "Thesis" wanted the communist cadres to combine "legal" and underground activities.

Later, in the same year, appeared "The Manifesto of the Anti-Imperialist Conference 1934". The "Manifesto" analysed the character of the Indian bourgeoisie having links with British capital as counter-revolutionary, denounced the Congress as "an organization of the Indian bourgeoisie and working in alliance with princes, landlords and zamindars", decried the slogan of a constituent assembly and urged the necessity of building an All-India Anti-Imperialist League. [\(14\)](#)

In "Problems of the Anti-Imperialist Struggle in India", which was published in *Imprecor* in March 1935, the CPI placed before the people a "minimum programme of the united front for the anti-imperialist struggle". The programme included, among others, "Complete and unconditional independence of India from Britain", "Refusal to participate in legislative councils and the cessation of all negotiations with British imperialism" and "Organization of the struggle of the masses against imperialism and against the imperialist sham constitution". One may remember that the White Paper, outlining "the imperialist sham constitution" of 1935 which the Congress leaders were preparing to work, had already been published. The document stated that the CPI "will develop inside the Congress organizations a wide independent mobilization of the masses for the struggle against imperialism, and will constantly put into effect the tactics of the united front when organizing any anti-imperialist action". The document decried the Congress slogan of a constituent assembly as intended "to distract the attention of the masses from the struggle against the draft of the sham constitution brought forward by imperialist Britain". [\(15\)](#)

The "Draft of the Provisional Statutes of the C.P. of India (Section of the Communist International)" appeared in *Imprecor* on 16 May 1934. [\(16\)](#) The politics that it upheld was the politics of the "Draft Platform of Action". This Party constitution insisted that the Party must be a strictly underground organization with its "central task to develop most widely mass work to establish its leadership in the mass revolutionary movements". Its aim was one of "combining the methods of underground work with semi-underground work and open work", and the Party should work in "all the mass organizations of the toilers, including the most reactionary organizations" seeking to win over the masses and isolate the reactionaries.

On the occasion of the Congress session in Bombay 1934, the CPI addressed an appeal to "the anti-imperialist rank and file of the Congress", entitled "Independence or Surrender?". It was a sharp criticism of Gandhi and the Congress leadership. The resolution that the AICC adopted at Patna in May 1934 against "a background of ruthless imperialist horror", the appeal said, "completely demonstrates the hypocrisy and the treachery of the Congress leadership. For the Patna resolution repudiates the struggle of the masses, it repudiates the Independence struggle; it puts its faith in the very councils and the Assembly wherefrom Congressmen were forced to resign only a few years back under the rising tide of popular discontent." It correctly pointed out: "The open repudiation of mass struggle is the preliminary step towards an acceptance of the White Paper proposal." It predicted that the Congress leadership was preparing to thrust "the slave constitution on the people of India in collaboration with British imperialists, landlords, feudal princes, capitalists and communalist traitors". The CPI made an appeal to the "sincere, anti-imperialist revolutionary fighters" not "to be dragged into counter-revolutionary paths by the Congress": it urged them "to build up the new organ of struggle, the anti-imperialist united front".

By 1935 the CPI overcame many of the sectarian deviations and again emerged as the leader of the working class in many industrial centres.

At the beginning of 1933 the communists raised the slogan of unity on the trade union front and began to try to bring about co-operation between the Red Trade Union Congress and the AITUC. [\(17\)](#) The working class

struggle began to recover early in 1934. An All India Textile Workers Conference was held in January 1934, and the CPI and the followers of M.N. Roy decided to organize jointly a country-wide strike of textile workers. A series of strikes started -- in Sholapur, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Ajmer, Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi, Nagpur, etc. By 27 April almost all Bombay mills were on strike, which lasted until some time in June. Some of the demands were purely political.(18) The Bombay Trade Disputes Conciliation Act of 1934 was enacted by the government with the declared aim of preventing "Communists and extremists from entering the textile affairs of Bombay City". It provided for compulsory arbitration of labour disputes and served as a model to Congress governments afterwards who added more teeth to similar legislations they framed. Leading communists like Joglekar, Mirajkar and Adhikari were arrested during the strike in Bombay.

According to Intelligence reports, the RTUC had "fairly numerous" activities in Bengal.(19) Anti-Gandhi demonstrations were organized in Calcutta in July 1934 jointly by the CPI and other groups. A "Gandhi Boycott Committee" which was later renamed "League against Gandhism" was set up in Calcutta.(20)

In Punjab the Kirti Kisan Party (the Workers and Peasants Party) was functioning and had its influence on the peasantry.

An Intelligence Bureau publication stated:

"The Party's field of activities had been extended to cover the three main railway systems, the entire textile industry in the Bombay Presidency and a part of the jute industry in Bengal and the cotton industry in Kanpur.... only a small beginning had been made with the work among the peasantry."(21)

In July 1934, the CPI, the Young Workers' League and other communist organizations, and a dozen trade unions led by the CPI were banned by the government. The Kirti Kisan Party of Punjab as well as its ally, the Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha, was declared illegal in September.

But no repression could prevent the spread of the influence of the CPI or the steady increase in its membership. At the CSP's all-India conference in October 1934, the CPI distributed a pamphlet with an appeal to the Congress socialists and revolutionary youths. It gave an elaborate analysis criticizing the betrayal of the Indian masses by the Congress leadership. About Nehru, it said :

"Socialism in words and counter-revolutionary Gandhism in deeds, revolutionary phrase-mongering in words and abject surrender to Gandhism in deeds -- that sums up our great 'Socialist' Mr J. Nehru."

The CPI invited the Congress socialists and revolutionary youths to "an anti-imperialist conference of all the revolutionary elements to draft the immediate programme of action on the basis of the united front". It rightly denounced the slogan of a constituent assembly as "a slogan of inaction and surrender".

The Calcutta Committee, while admiring the heroism and self-sacrifice of the "terrorist youths", made a fervent appeal to them to give up terrorist methods as futile and to join the CPI to fulfil their cherished object. Many national revolutionary youths in prisons and concentration camps had already been reappraising their policy and were accepting Marxism. Gradually a large number of them joined the CPI and strengthened it.

After the formation of the CSP, this party and the communists started joint work on the trade union front. On the CSP's initiative, agreement between it, the AITUC, the Red Trade Union Congress and the National Trade Union Federation was achieved for joint work on specific issues.(22) The communists joined the AITUC at its annual session in Calcutta in April 1935 on the basis of an agreed programme and dissolved the Red Trade Union Congress.(23)

Many communists joined the CSP on an individual basis in 1934 and, as Masani writes, "by 1937-38 the CSP had two communists as Joint Secretaries and two others in the Executive Committee".(23a) When the

CSP decided in March 1940 to expel the communists from its organization, it lost to them its entire branches in Andhra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala and many members and units in northern India.

Writing in March 1935, the Director of the Intelligence Bureau, GOI, regretted that "we are now back in the same position as in 1929 when the [Meerut] case was instituted, with the drawback that our enemies have gained considerably in experience".<sup>(24)</sup>

To repeat, by 1935 the CPI had corrected many of its left-sectarian mistakes. It was trying to build up a genuine anti-imperialist united front of the toiling masses. It was the only party in India working with an anti-imperialist programme when the Congress leadership, guided by the Birlas, had not only abjured mass struggle but given commitments to the raj to work the imperialist constitution, "a charter of slavery", and looked forward to serving as a partner of British imperialism in the oppression and exploitation of our people. The period that was opening was rich in possibilities. The CPI alone could come out as the leader of the anti-imperialist masses by shattering their illusions about the Congress leadership which was going to accept openly the role of an appendage of the British imperialist machinery in India.

But all possibilities were wasted away as the line and policies of the CPI were completely reversed under the influence of foreign mentors. "The Anti-Imperialist People's Front in India", a joint work of R. Palme Dutt and Ben Bradley of the Communist Party of Great Britain, known as the "Dutt-Bradley thesis", appeared in *Imprecator* on 29 February 1936 and in the CPGB's organ, *Labour Monthly*, on 6 March. It was a line entirely worked out by the foreign mentors, who dismissed the CPI as irrelevant in formulating the CPI's own line and policies.

The "Dutt-Bradley thesis" was followed by another article "The United National Front", authored by Harry Pollitt (General Secretary of the CPGB), Palme Dutt and Ben Bradley on behalf of "the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain". The "United National Front" was carried by *Imprecator* on 7 November 1936.

While "The Anti-Imperialist People's Front" asserted that the Congress, though "not yet the united front of the Indian people in the national struggle", "*can play a great part and a foremost part in the work of realizing the Anti-Imperialist People's Front*", the second document instructed the CPI "*to make the Indian National Congress the pivot of the United National Front*". The first document stated that, despite some surrenders on the part of the leadership, the Congress stood for "irreconcilable struggle against imperialism for complete independence" and prescribed that the CPI should try to bring about some changes in the Congress constitution to make it a democratic organization and get the organizations of the workers and peasants affiliated to the Congress with the help of the CSP and other 'left' Congressmen and thus complete the process of the evolution of the Congress as the anti-imperialist people's front. When the object of the foreign mentors was to turn the CPI into an appendage of the Congress, there was no end to wishful thinking. They neither analysed the class character of the Congress leadership nor did they hesitate to recant whatever they had said earlier or to contradict whatever the Communist International and the CPI had written about the Congress. "The United National Front" lauded Nehru as the great leader of the anti-imperialist struggle and builder of the united front against imperialism. Reviewing Nehru's *Autobiography* and Subhas Bose's *The Indian Struggle 1920-1934*, Palme Dutt wrote that "Nehru's Presidential address at Lucknow in April [1936]...marked a historic turning point..." He observed:

"With regard to the future, both Nehru and Bose are convinced of the necessity for *a radical change in the policy, organization and leadership of the national movement in order to realize the aim of independence*."<sup>(25)</sup>

One marvels where Palme Dutt discovered all this about Nehru!

The idea of a united anti-imperialist front was not a new one. Before 1936, the CPI had been trying to build such a front and achieved some success. In 1937 Mao Tsetung put the question:

"Is the proletariat to follow the bourgeoisie, or is the bourgeoisie to follow the proletariat? This question of responsibility for leadership in the Chinese revolution is the linchpin upon which the success or failure of the revolution depends." (26)

The Marxist-Leninist thesis that in the era after the Russian revolution the national liberation struggle can achieve victory only under the leadership of the proletariat was thrown overboard. Though not directly, the foreign mentors asked the CPI to abandon the task of fighting colonialism and rally behind the Congress to build a *sham* anti-imperialist front instead of a genuine one. The Congress leadership, guided by the Birlas, had capitulated to British imperialism and made commitments of abjuring mass action and serving as its tool. By rallying behind the capitulationist Congress leadership including Nehru (whose rhetorical verbiage and actual deeds were poles asunder), the CPI leadership under the influence of foreign mentors changed its line from a revolutionary one to an opportunist one, trailed politically behind the big collaborationist bourgeoisie and pursued essentially the same capitulationist line.

On the issue of 'non-violence', the 'Dutt-Bradley thesis' conceded that "it has been used...to shackle and hold in all effective mass activity and the development along the lines of the class struggle of the most powerful weapons against imperialism", but warned: "This issue should not be allowed to split the national front."

"The United National Front" went still further. It affirmed that besides violence and "non-violent passive resistance" a "third way" existed. Whether there would be violent clashes depended on the imperialists. According to these eminent theoreticians, the Indian sub-continent might accomplish the anti-imperialist revolution pursuing the "third way" of boycotts, strikes and so on and avoiding a violent revolution!

The 'Dutt-Bradley thesis' asserted: "The question of the elections is of cardinal importance for the anti-imperialist front" and enjoined the CPI to run some candidates in agreement with the Congress leadership. The participation in the elections that would be held a little later would obviously mean not a struggle against the most reactionary British-imposed constitution but acceptance of it. That is exactly what the Birlas and the Gandhis sought to do. They had abjured even sham struggles against the raj and decided to follow the path of sham parliamentarism. "The United National Front" document hailed the Congress election manifesto as "an inspiring document", though it did not touch on any of the basic anti-imperialist, democratic tasks -- the confiscation of imperialist capital, the abolition of landlordism without compensation, the distribution of land among the tillers, etc.(27)

Both the 'Dutt-Bradley thesis' and the later document insisted that the demand for convening a constituent assembly should be launched as the *central slogan*. As noted before, this slogan had been first raised by M.N. Roy, then picked up by Nehru and the Congress leadership and approved by G.D. Birla. The manifesto of the Congress Parliamentary Board drafted by Gandhi and adopted by the Board at its joint meeting with the Congress Working Committee explicitly said that the constituent assembly, as they contemplated, could "be convened only by an agreement between the Governing Powers and the people...."(28) Haithcox is quite right when he says:

"The Congress leadership envisioned it [the constituent assembly] as a body to be convened under the auspices of the British government and as a means of avoiding revolutionary conflict."(29)

Now the object of the foreign mentors was not different from that of the Congress leaders, though earlier the CPI and the Communist International had decried this slogan of the constituent assembly, replacing the demand for national freedom, as a move to derail the people's anti-imperialist struggles. For instance, a contributor had observed in *Communist International*: "this slogan was intended to bribe the masses with its 'revolutionary' appearance. At the same time, it makes it possible to *replace* the struggle *against* the British imperialist project of a *fake constitution* by the decorative and fruitless preparations for the calling of a constituent assembly, which is to receive constituent rights, *no one knows how or whence* [emphasis added].

"The slogan of the constituent assembly came just at the right moment for the Congressmen [and then for the Pollitts and Palme Dutts], for the additional reason that it provided additional concealment for the capitulatory comprador entrance of the Congressmen into the legislative councils."(30)

## Chapter Seven:

### "Seemingly in the Opposite Camp"

#### *The Outbreak of World War II and the Congress*

The long-awaited war came. After Germany's attack on Poland, Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939. On that very day the Viceroy of India, without any reference to the Central Assembly or to the ministries in the provinces or to any Indian political organization, announced that India was at war with Germany and issued the Defence of India Ordinance curtailing civil liberties. The same day the British Parliament passed an amendment to the GOI Act 1935, empowering the Viceroy to do away with provincial 'autonomy', if he so willed.

Since 1927 the Congress leaders had been adopting resolutions and issuing statements declaring that the Congress would resist any attempt by the British to impose war on India. In the 1937 elections the Congress sought votes promising in its election manifesto that it would oppose India's participation in any imperialist war. In 1938 the Haripura Congress affirmed that India would not "permit her manpower and resources to be exploited in the interest of British imperialism". In March 1939 the Tripuri Congress recorded "its entire disapproval of British foreign policy culminating in the Munich Pact", etc., a policy of "deliberate betrayal of democracy", and resolved to keep aloof from both Imperialism and Fascism.

In April 1939, as war-clouds thickened, the British Parliament passed an amendment to the GOI Act 1935, empowering the Central government to assume all powers of provincial governments during an emergency arising from war or the threat of war. The AICC expressed its determination "to oppose all attempts to impose a war on India" and described the constitutional amendment as creating "a war dictatorship of the Central Government in India" and making "Provincial Governments helpless agents of Imperialism". On 10 August, only three weeks before the war started, the Working Committee "declared its opposition to any imperialist war" and directed the Congress members of the Central Legislative Assembly to boycott its next session as a mark of protest against the despatch of Indian troops to Egypt and Singapore. Throughout this period, Nehru's rhetoric, as usual, was strident.

And, as usual, the Congress policy was a two-faced one -- one face turned towards the people and another face turned towards the raj.

At a conference of the Prime Ministers of the Congress provinces, convened by Patel, in the last week of August 1939, a few days after the above solemn declaration of the Working Committee, "the most important decision", to quote K.M. Munshi, Secretary of the Conference, "was to the effect that in the event of war 'co-operation with the British should be whole-hearted if an understanding were arrived at between the Congress and the Government'."(1)

The day after Linlithgow's announcement imposing war on India and promulgation of the Defence of India Ordinance, Gandhi rushed to Simla to respond to the Viceroy's invitation and, while imagining in the presence of the Viceroy the "possible destruction" of "the Houses of Parliament and the Westminster Abbey", he "broke down", became "disconsolate", was not "thinking of India's deliverance" and conveyed his "sympathies...with England and France". The apostle of non-violence told the Viceroy that personally he was for full and unquestioning co-operation with Britain in her war efforts.(2) Less than one year before, Gandhi had declared:



"For me, even if I stand alone, there is no participation in the war even if the Government should surrender the whole control to the Congress."(3)

Nehru hurried back from Chiang Kai-shek's capital Chungking and on his way back he declared at Rangoon:

"We do not approach the problem with a view to taking advantage of Britain's difficulties.... I should like India to play her full part and throw all her resources into the struggle for a new order."(4)

At the Haripura Congress Nehru had said :

"If England fights and wins, it is British imperialism that wins and the British hold on India is strengthened thereby. On no account therefore can we be parties to India's helping in such a war -- even against the fascist powers."(5)

Patel, too, struck a moral tone. "There was no intention", he said, "that the Congress should harass the British Government in its present plight."(6)

The desire to line up behind British imperialism and the repudiation of past pledges were not surprising. This was not only consistent with their past policies but also in conformity with the needs of the hour.

The advent of a new world war held out a thrilling prospect before the big compradors. World War I had enabled them to grow and expand; World War II, which would invariably rain misery and death on the already impoverished people of this British colony, was greeted by the big bourgeoisie in the hope that it would shower gold on them. (And it did.) Just on the eve of the war G.D. Birla sent Gandhi for his comments the draft of a statement which he and other tycoons proposed to issue immediately after the outbreak of the war. The draft stated that "after the successful functioning of provincial autonomy during the last two years and a half", the "existing differences between India and England" were "capable of satisfactory solution and amicable settlement through friendly negotiations" and held that *it was "not difficult to evolve a scheme of national defence as an integral part of the defence of the British Commonwealth"*.(7)

After the outbreak of the war Birla wrote to Mahadev Desai:

*"Maybe India and England may start competition with each other in manufacturing cordiality and friendship."*(8)

And Birla continued to play an active role as an intermediary, as active as before, so that no conflict marred the relations between British imperialism and the Congress and a friendly settlement was arrived at in the new situation.

Another tycoon, Lala Sir Shri Ram, insisted that "the Congress must not bargain with the British raj to squeeze out promises until the war was over".(9)

While presiding over the annual session of the FICCI in March 1940, C.S.R. Mudaliar said that "the war should be seen as an opportunity for furthering industrial expansion, and that the expanded and new industries should receive adequate protection after the war". This theme became the "main concern of the session".(10) True to their character, the big bourgeoisie viewed the war between the rival imperialist powers not as an opportunity for achieving freedom from the foreign yoke but in furthering their own interests by serving British imperialism.

The Muslim League leader, Choudhury Khaliqzaman, wrote that the League was pressed towards greater co-operation with the British by Muslim business magnates as well as by "our Muslim taluqdars and Zamindars...interested in smaller contracts.... They could hardly be expected to forgo the chance of a life-time".(11)

The war brought the raj closer to the big businessmen. The raj depended on them for procurement and production of materials essential for war. The Eastern Group Supply Council was set up early in 1941 with Britain, the dominions and India to plan production and procurement of war materials. Commerce expanded and industries thrived; vast profits, legitimate and illegitimate, were raked in, despite the Excess Profits Tax of 50 per cent, at the cost of the blood and sweat of the people. It was boom time for Indian business.

It may be noted that the Hindu Mahasabha, from which the Bharatiya Janata Party has descended, pledged all support to British war efforts.

There was within and outside the Congress a considerable section of political workers, usually called the 'Left Wing' -- the followers of Subhas Bose, the Congress socialists, the communists, the Kisan Sabha members, etc. -- who were urging that a mass anti-imperialist struggle should be launched. An anti-war demonstration in which many thousands took part was held in Madras on the day the war was imposed on India. In early September numerous meetings denouncing the imperialist war took place in different parts of India.<sup>(12)</sup> On 2 October 90,000 workers went on a one-day political strike in Bombay condemning the imperialist war -- "the first anti-war strike in the world labour movement".<sup>(13)</sup>

On the other hand, the Congress ministers were more loyalists than the Britishers themselves.

"In the U.P.", writes S.Gopal, "the ministers seemed willing to give full co-operation in prosecution of the war, while in Madras the Governor had to restrain Rajagopalachari, on the outbreak of hostilities, from detaining all Germans and seizing their bank balances, 'whereupon he commented that the English seemed to want to wage war according to High Court rules'".<sup>(14)</sup>

In Bombay, Kher and his colleagues assured Governor Lumley of their support for Britain. "Not only that, Munshi had expressed a desire to participate more actively in the war effort" and he became Chairman of the War Committee, while a Cabinet Sub-Committee was formed with Kher, Munshi and another minister.

"In Bombay, Kher had assured the Governor for many months that *he would always keep the latter posted on developments* and even when resignation had to be implemented it would be done 'in a dignified and amicable manner'".<sup>(15)</sup>

Meeting from 10 to 14 September, the Working Committee adopted a long-winded resolution on the basis of Nehru's draft, inviting the raj to declare its war aims and seeking to know how these would apply to India<sup>(16)</sup> -- a resolution which, according to Subhas, represented "a policy of inaction".<sup>(17)</sup> To these astute leaders the war aims of the Chamberlains and Churchills needed further clarification, especially after the "war dictatorship of the Central Government" and the unilateral imposition of war on India. At this meeting Gandhi "said that there should be no obstruction *nor non-co-operation*, and that [Congress] ministers should carry on to the extent it was possible and offer *co-operation in all respects* in which they could do so conscientiously". He wrote that Congress support should have been "unconditional in the sense that the Congress would not have asked for clarification of Britain's war aims".<sup>(18)</sup>

Subhas was invited to attend this meeting. At the meeting Subhas insisted that the Congress should launch civil disobedience to achieve freedom without delay. Naturally, there was a sharp clash between him and Nehru. Munshi wrote that Gandhi managed to secure "a promise from him [Subhas] that he would remain quiet for a certain period".<sup>(19)</sup> Gandhi was dissatisfied with the resolution. But prudence dictated the policy of the Working Committee which rejected Gandhi's advice for overt co-operation with the raj.

In a letter to Birla, Mahadev lamented:

"Bapu's proposition did not find favour with the W.C. Vallabhbhai and others did not, I fear, have the courage to go to the country with Bapu's proposition.... The future is dark and gloomy and we may have to wander in wilderness now for three or more years".<sup>(20)</sup>

Again, he wrote to Birla :

"Heaven alone knows what is in store for us. But the principle of non-violence by which we have been swearing these 20 years seems to be under a heavy eclipse."(21)

Birla also was disappointed and criticized the resolution as "a rambling document". With the declaration of war he had proposed that the Working Committee should appoint Gandhi "the sole plenipotentiary" of the Congress -- a proposal to which Patel agreed. Now, he wanted Gandhi to see the Viceroy again, for what was needed was "personal contact" and the Working Committee should not "talk through statements".(22) As desired by Birla, 'Bapu' was "doing the needful". He sent his secretary Mahadev on an "ambassadorial mission" to Rajagopalachari in Madras "to tell him how much he can do at this juncture".(23) Rajagopalachari had his interviews with the Viceroy.

When Gandhi saw Linlithgow again on 26 September, he gave him "an account of the Congress Working Committee discussion at Wardha" and urged him for a declaration of policy. The Viceroy told him that "*the British government would be most unwilling to define their war aims at this stage and had never committed themselves in the least degree to fighting for democracy*".(24)

As V.P. Menon writes,

"The Viceroy stressed the lack of agreement between the various parties and the extreme seriousness and gravity of the communal issue" and stated that "*agreement between the communities would be a condition precedent for future constitutional advance*".(25)

Gandhi pleaded in vain with the Viceroy that he "should not allow the Muslim League to come in any way in connection with the terms of any declaration I [the Viceroy] might make, for *the Congress carry their claim to be the one party entitled to speak or to be consulted on behalf of India, in connection with anything affecting India as a whole, to full length*".(26)

Nehru was effusive in praise of Chiang Kai-shek and the U.S. ruling classes. He paid his tribute to "the supreme leader and commander of China, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, who embodies in himself the unity of China and her determination to free herself".(27) The ruling classes of the U.S.A., on whom "ultimately will fall the burden of the future, whether they will it or not", "will no doubt play a dominating part in the reshaping of world affairs" and could establish a new world order free from imperialist wars. "We", he said, "*naturally look to America in many ways*".(28)

Nehru had already forged close relations with the US ruling classes and the Chiangs. It appears from his two letters to Krishna Menon, dated 10 July and 15 August 1939, that his visit to Chungking, Chiang's capital, was arranged by the US ruling classes in consultation with the Chiangs and the British raj. On his way from China to Europe one Edward Carter, secretary-general of the American Institute of Pacific Relations, saw Nehru and, on reaching England, had consultations with British cabinet ministers, and Nehru's visit was arranged. On the eve of his departure for China on 20 August 1939, Nehru received a long cable from the Chinese ambassador in London, who conveyed to him not only his good wishes and greetings but also Churchill's good wishes for success of his mission.(28a)

Soon after the CWC meeting in September, Nehru started a campaign which, while extolling Gandhi's leadership and the technique of non-violence -- "the new technique of fight evolved by Mahatma Gandhi [which] has nonplussed the British Government, as they do not know how to combat it"(29) -- tirelessly denounced those like Subhas, communists, Congress socialists and others who wanted a more militant line to be pursued.(30) And he publicly claimed that the CWC resolution of September, to which the British government attached no importance, "will shake to the foundations all imperialisms" and "uproot British imperialism".(31)

In private Nehru, states S.Gopal, his biographer and admirer, "made clear, even if only indirectly, *his anxiety to assist personally to the full in the war effort*, and wanted the association of persons like himself...with some form of National War Council. If India and Britain waged war together as equal partners *with no formal legal changes*, but with Indian leaders being taken into confidence and associated with decisions...this in itself would have removed most of the constitutional difficulties by the time the war had been successfully concluded. *But it was hinted that Jawaharlal would not insist even on this.*"

According to Gopal, the Congress "conveyed to the Viceroy that it would be satisfied with a declaration clearly stating that India would be free to determine her own destiny after the war".(32)

When Nehru and Prasad saw the Viceroy on 3 October they were bluntly told that

"There could be no extensive expansion of the Executive Council or sharing of power with political parties in the central government. All he [the Viceroy] was prepared to do was to form a group from the two houses of the central legislature with whom the Government would keep in touch on defence matters."(33)

Yet pining for a gesture from the British imperialists, Nehru wrote a long letter to Linlithgow on 6 October. He regretted a "number of very undesirable speeches" made by Congressmen immediately after the outbreak of the war, and pointed out the *calming influence of the Working Committee resolution* of 14 September and "some action" taken in this regard by the Congress government of U.P. He wrote about an errant Congress M.L.A. "whose tongue runs away with him when he discusses the plight of the peasantry" and who was sobered by several warnings and advice from Nehru and other leaders. He went on to say *how much he desired "that the long conflict of India and England should be ended and that they should co-operate together....* It was a pleasure to meet you for a second time, and whenever chance offers an opportunity for this again, I shall avail myself of it."(34)

To quote Gopal again, "Jawaharlal was desperately anxious to find a way which would enable the Congress to co-operate with the Government."(35)

Devdas Gandhi saw the Viceroy's private secretary Laithwaite with a letter from Mahadev Desai, which was written "at Bapu's instance, giving him an account of the AICC and the part that Jawaharlal had played in it". Laithwaite promised to show the letter to the Viceroy as he showed him "*all that Mahadev sends me*". Devdas assured Laithwaite that "there is really no bargaining because in a sense *you have already got the Congress support and help incoming in various ways*". While acknowledging "the greatest possible assistance from Mr Gandhi" received by the Viceroy and assuring Devdas that "whatever happens *nothing can alter the great mutual understanding between H.E. and your father*", Laithwaite stressed the difficulties impeding a settlement -- "The Mussalmans and the others" who "don't agree with the Congress".(36)

Not only the Viceroy but Secretary of State Lord Zetland too was quite sensible of the role Gandhi was playing. Speaking in the House of Lords, Zetland spoke of Gandhi in eloquent terms and acknowledged "the help which he has most willingly given us in our endeavours to surmount them [the difficulties]".(37) Interestingly, the Viceroy informed Gandhi on 3 June 1940 that the Maharaja of Darbhanga, then the biggest landlord in the whole of India, had given him a bust of Gandhi done by Clare Sheridan and that Linlithgow proposed to have it exhibited first in Bombay and then "to make it over to the Government of India with the suggestion that it should ultimately find a permanent home in the national capital".(38) It was no small tribute to Gandhi from the King's representative in India and a prominent representative of the feudal class.

Gandhi could smell violence in the air and was determined to resist civil disobedience. As Mahadev Desai wrote to G.D.Birla, "...Bapu alone is capable of holding back the tide of the civil disobedience movement and this he is already doing and will continue to do so till the very last."(39) While regretting that his "views in regard to unconditional co-operation are not shared by the country", the prophet of non-violence went on declaiming that "this war may be used to end all wars".(40)

After several rounds of discussion with Congress and Muslim League leaders, Linlithgow declared on 17 October 1939 that, as before, the grant of dominion status remained the ultimate goal of the British policy and that at the end of the war the raj would be prepared "to enter into consultation with representatives of the several communities, parties and interests in India and with the Indian princes" for *modifying* suitably the Government of India Act of 1935. During the war the raj proposed to set up "a *consultative* group representative of all the major political parties in British India and of the Indian Princes", over which the Viceroy would preside.<sup>(41)</sup> To the embarrassment of the Congress leaders, the raj refused to make the slightest concession to them. Moreover, it did not want to displease the Muslims, between whom and the Congress the gulf had grown wider particularly since the ministry-making in 1937 by the Congress.

Meeting on 22 and 23 October, the Congress Working Committee asked Congress ministries in the provinces to resign. At the same time it warned "Congressmen against any hasty action in the shape of civil disobedience, political strikes and the like".

Through messages to the foreign press and other statements, Gandhi assured the concerned people that "*the Congress must not embarrass the rulers in the prosecution of the war*" and that he was "in no hurry to precipitate civil disobedience".<sup>(42)</sup>

Why did the Working Committee ask the Congress ministers to lay down their precious burden and go into the wilderness, which they were extremely reluctant to do?

"Lord Linlithgow's private letters to Lord Zetland", writes B.B. Misra, "show that when the Congress decided to call out its Ministries, it did so 'only for the time being' under the impression that the exigencies of the war would compel the British Government to accept its terms of settlement. In fact, the Congress detested 'the thought of leaving office' for any considerable period and was 'anxious to resume power as soon as it can be made possible for it to do so'."<sup>(43)</sup> G.D.Birla could not "conceive that all that has been done during the last two years will now be undone suddenly". He continued to maintain contacts with the Viceroy, members of his family, and other high British officials to smooth matters.<sup>(44)</sup> According to Sitarammaya, "Some of the ministers themselves playfully and jocularly stated that they were all taking a three-month holiday. But every joke has a core of truth to be sure."<sup>(45)</sup>

During an interview with the Viceroy on 12 January 1940, Munshi reported to him about an anti-imperialist undercurrent among ordinary Congressmen and expressed his fear that Gandhi might not be able to keep them on leash for a long time. Defending their resignation as ministers, he said:

"We could not have continued long in office and helped you in the war unless we had obtained a share in the Centre which could justify our being there.... For instance, Subhas would have made our task very difficult.... if we had been in power he would have got himself arrested only in order to make our position difficult. Now things are better from every point of view and things should be done early.... You hold Gandhiji in great respect and Gandhiji, I am sure, holds you equally in great respect and if you both cannot settle the matter, nationalism will naturally go into wilderness."<sup>(46)</sup>

The Congress ministries had to be withdrawn for two main reasons. First, if they remained in office, the anti-imperialist mask of the Congress leadership would fall off. The ministers would have to serve *openly* as imperialism's agents and use the Defence of India Act and ordinances to suppress anti-imperialist struggles and perform every other dirty job when the tide of anti-imperialist feeling was rising. Moreover, as Munshi said, "The prestige of the Congress Working Committee was at a low ebb since the Tripuri Congress in March 1939."<sup>(47)</sup> Second, this decision, "nothing more than a passive action", was "intended to soften the attitude of left-wing circles, without involving anti-imperialist activity".<sup>(48)</sup> While this manoeuvre saved the Congress from internal disruption, it helped the raj to prosecute its war efforts unhindered by a political party holding offices in provinces, which, for its very existence, had to face both ways.

As Sitaramayya wrote, the Congress was faced with the dilemma that on the one hand, it could not initiate any satyagraha for fear that it might result in "red ruin and anarchy"; on the other hand, "to keep quiet to



allow the ministries to function would be...to wipe out the Congress as a political party at the end of the war". Both satyagraha and withdrawal of ministries were evils. "The choice then", said Sitaramayya, "lay between the worse and the better of two evils." [\(49\)](#)

Appreciating the Working Committee's decision, Sir Stafford Cripps commented: "it was wise on the part of Mr Gandhi not to have hurried things and to have kept the door open." After "fairly lengthy interviews with Gandhi, Jawaharlal and the Sardar", Cripps "took with him back to London a long detailed memorandum prepared by Gandhi". [\(50\)](#) Sitaramayya does not disclose the contents of the memorandum nor does *The Complete Works of Mahatma Gandhi*.

Gandhi, Jinnah and Prasad met the Viceroy again on 1 November "to try to work out an arrangement in the provincial field as a prelude to co-operation at the centre". On 2 November Jinnah had a meeting with Gandhi and Prasad, but Gandhi and Prasad refused to discuss anything on the plea that the communal issue was not related to the political crisis and that the British government must first clarify its war-aims. [\(51\)](#) "Co-operation at the centre" with the colonial masters, so longed for by the Congress leaders, eluded them as they refused to agree to co-operation with the League in the provinces.

Appreciating the Viceroy's 'sincerity', Gandhi urged "fellow workers not to lose patience". [\(52\)](#) Indeed, as Sitaramayya stated, "*The British Government was not the problem to Gandhi. There were two internal foes or problems*": they were the Muslim League and impatient Congressmen. [\(53\)](#)

## Chapter Eight:

### 'Quit India': Before and After

#### *The New Phase of the War and Congress*

The war entered a new phase when Germany broke the Non-Aggression Pact with the Soviet Union and launched a blitzkrieg against it on 22 June 1941. With the vast resources of most of Europe at their command and with an efficient military machine, the Nazis hoped to bring the Soviet Union to its knees within a few weeks. Initially, the march of Nazi troops and tanks into the Soviet territory did not meet with much resistance. Then began resistance which the Nazis had not bargained for.

Soon the Soviet Union and Britain concluded a treaty of alliance. In August 1941 the U.S.A. and Britain issued the 'Atlantic Charter' as the statement of their war policy, declaring:

"They respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of Government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them."

But Britain's Prime Minister Churchill announced in the House of Commons in September that the 'Atlantic Charter' did not apply to India, Burma and other British colonies.

On 7 December Japan attacked Pearl Harbour, an important U.S. naval base in the Pacific and destroyed the U.S. fleet there. She declared war on Britain and the USA. With the entry of the USA into the war, an alliance was formed between the Soviet Union, Britain and the USA. The Japanese swept through South-East Asia knocking down U.S., British and Dutch defences of their colonies with almost effortless ease.

The members of the Congress Working Committee, which met at Bardoli from 23 to 30 December 1941, differed on the question of non-violence. Nehru, Azad and Rajagopalachari wanted to discard non-violence and participate in war efforts if the British would be persuaded by the grim war situation to make some concessions and buy their support. But Patel, Prasad and some others insisted on no participation, refusing to compromise with their creed of non-violence, which had been of a more accommodating type in July 1940

and before. Gandhi, who had offered, and insisted on, unconditional co-operation with the raj in its war efforts at the initial phase of the war, refused to abandon non-violence, "the faith of a lifetime".<sup>(1)</sup> A resolution offering conditional support to the war was adopted by the Working Committee. At his request Gandhi was relieved of the responsibility of guiding the Congress.<sup>(2)</sup>

Meeting at Wardha in mid-January 1942, the AICC adopted the resolution with some minor additions. While declaring at the meeting that he "won't exchange *ahimsa* even for independence", Gandhi supported the resolution and asked other 'believers' in non-violence to support it. Interestingly, he criticized China for defending herself with arms. At this meeting he announced:

"...Jawaharlal will be my successor. He says whatever is uppermost in his mind, but he always does what I want."<sup>(3)</sup>

Chiang Kai-shek and Madame Chiang came to India in February 1942 to bring the government and the Congress closer. Chiang met the Viceroy as well as the Congress leaders. Nehru escorted the Chiangs, Madame Chiang in particular, to different places, and arranged an interview between Chiang and Gandhi. The Chiangs were among those who served later as links between Nehru and the Congress on the one hand and the U.S. authorities, including Roosevelt, on the other.<sup>(4)</sup> On being asked by the press whether he had discussed the Indian problem with Chiang, Nehru with his usual modesty replied: "Certainly, we discussed India. *After all I am India.*" He thought of himself "as a symbol of India" -- "like the national flag".<sup>(5)</sup>

With the rapid advance of the Japanese in South-East Asia, U.S. President Roosevelt was afraid that India was as good as lost. He continued to put pressure on Churchill without offending much the susceptibilities of the British imperialists to grant dominion status to India.<sup>(6)</sup> The U.S. imperialists had been seeking an open door to the British colonies, especially India, and found in the war an opportunity to force Britain to relax her hold on India.

On 30 September 1939, soon after the outbreak of the war, Joseph Kennedy, then U.S. ambassador to Britain, wrote to Roosevelt:

"War regardless of the outcome, will merely hasten the process [of Britain's decline as a world power].... the leadership of the English-speaking world will, willy-nilly, be ours."<sup>(7)</sup>

In December 1940, when Nehru was extolling the USA as the champion of democracy and freedom, Virgil Jordan, the president of the National Industrial Conference Board of the USA, said in the course of his address to the Investment Bankers' Association:

"At best, England will become [after the war] a junior partner in a new Anglo-Saxon imperialism, in which the economic resources and the military and naval strength of the United States will be the centre of gravity. Southward is our hemisphere and westward in the Pacific the path of empire takes its way, and in modern terms of economic power as well as political prestige, the sceptre passes to the United States."<sup>(8)</sup>

Nehru was convinced like Gandhi that the end of the British empire was quite near. It became the burden of his many speeches that the British empire was disappearing, that India would soon become free and that "mostly Russia and China...are keeping up the British structure in Europe and Asia".<sup>(9)</sup> He was sure that "countless eyes from all over the world look up to it [the USA] for leadership in the paths of peace and freedom", that "The next hundred years...are going to be the century of America" -- "America on whom rests a vast burden of responsibility, and towards whom so many millions look for right leadership at this crisis in world history".<sup>(10)</sup>

Nehru was highly critical of the 'People's War' slogan of the CPI, which came to hold at the end of 1941 that after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union the imperialist war had changed into a People's War. Inaugurating the 19th session of the AITUC at Kanpur in February 1942, he denounced the communists, blamed the workers and peasants of the world for "arming themselves with guns and producing aeroplanes"

and "destroying each other's countries", and held China and Russia responsible for keeping British imperialism alive. He exhorted the people to "organize themselves in accordance with the *orders* of the Congress and snatch freedom from this British Government..."(11)

### *The Cripps Mission*

Churchill yielded to US pressure as well as to that of his Labourite colleagues like Clement Attlee, who criticized "the *crude* imperialism of the Viceroy" as "fatally short-sighted and suicidal", believed that "To mark time is to lose India" and suggested that "some person of high standing" should be sent out "with wide powers to negotiate a settlement with India".(12) On 9 March, the day after Rangoon had fallen to the Japanese, the British cabinet decided to send Stafford Cripps, then an influential member of the cabinet, to India to negotiate a settlement with Indian leaders. The Tory members of the cabinet agreed more as a gesture to the USA than out of any genuine desire for a settlement. Cripps was to negotiate within the framework of a Draft Declaration of the cabinet: it was subject to amendments after discussion with Indian leaders provided the cabinet approved of them. As Secretary of State Amery wired to Linlithgow, he was far from sure "whether Cripps succeeds in squaring the circle or not". He expected adverse Congress reaction as "the nest contains the Pakistan cuckoo's egg".(13)

Arriving in India on 22 March, Cripps had discussions with the Viceroy and preliminary talks with Indian leaders of different political persuasions and then announced at a press conference the cabinet's draft declaration. It provided for an elected constituent assembly after the war was over, which could opt for dominionhood or independence. It gave the provinces which were not prepared to accept the constitution framed by the constituent assembly the right to opt out of the Indian Union. It invited "the immediate and effective participation of the leaders of the principal sections of the Indian people in the counsels of the country, of the Commonwealth and of the United Nations". While this was worded vaguely, the draft made it clear that defence would remain the responsibility of the British government.(14)

Even before Cripps came and the proposals were known, Gandhi had decided to reject them. Mahadev Desai had written to Birla on 14 March:

"Let Cripps come, if he likes. What does he hope to get from Babu? He should get busy placating Jawaharlal and Rajaji."(15)

When Cripps met Gandhi on 27 March, the latter "expressed the very definite view that Congress would not accept the document".(16) Gandhi wrote to Nehru who was in favour of acceptance of the British proposals: "I am clearly of the view that we cannot accept this `offer'".(17)

Gandhi was then more than convinced that the collapse of the British empire was imminent. When Rangoon fell, "the shadow of a heavy and far-reaching military defeat" lay over India, as Churchill himself said.(18) Even earlier, on 21 February, in a broadcast to the country, the deputy chief of General Staff in India, General Molesworth, had warned that the Japanese warships which were on the prowl in the Indian Ocean, might increase their activities, and that Japanese raids and landings on Indian coasts were feared. The Andaman Islands were occupied by the Japanese on 23 March. At such a moment the Gandhis did not think it prudent that India should "make herself", to quote Sitaramayya, "a trailer to a sinking steamship or hitch her wagon to a falling star".(19) They preferred, as we shall see, to hitch their wagon to the `rising sun' of Asia. Cripps wired to Churchill on 4 April that the "Gandhi wing of the Congress" regarded "Great Britain as defeated and unimportant so far as the future of India is concerned".(20) Dismissing the Cripps proposals as "a post-dated cheque on a crashing bank", (21) Gandhi refused to wait in Delhi until the end of the negotiations and left for Sevagram on 4 April. But before leaving Delhi, Gandhi again warned Nehru that the Cripps offer could not be accepted.(22)

The Gandhi-Patel wing of the Congress would not compromise itself in the eyes of the Japanese whose victory seemed to them imminent. "Indeed", writes R. J. Moore, "Cripps imagined Gandhi to be `actually desirous to bring about a state of chaos while he sits at Wardha eating vegetables'".(23)

Nehru, too, as Gandhi said, "is convinced that the British empire is finished".<sup>(24)</sup> But Nehru believed in the ultimate defeat of the Axis Powers and in the emergence of the USA as the dominant power which would shape the future of the world. As noted before, it was the Americans who, in consultation with the British government, arranged his visit to Chiang Kai-shek in 1939. He was all praise for the US ruling class, "the ally of the rotten Kuomintang generals" and various other reactionaries. The US ruling class also was depending on him. In February 1942, Roosevelt sent Nehru "a friendly message through Edgar Snow", requesting Nehru to write to him telling him what Nehru "wants me to do for India". Snow was told to send Nehru's reply "through our diplomatic pouch".<sup>(25)</sup>

Throughout the war the US ruling class was putting irresistible pressure on the British to loosen their hold on the empire. After the fall of France the Americans agreed to give the British some military hardware in exchange for long-term leases to set up US naval and air bases in various British possessions in the Western hemisphere.<sup>(26)</sup> Early in 1942 the Americans demanded and ensured the dismantling of the system of imperial preference as a *quid pro quo* for their lend-lease aid (Article 7 of the Lend-Lease Agreement), rejecting Churchill's pleas.<sup>(27)</sup> They insisted on an 'open door' for U.S. capital and goods into India and other British colonies and on exploiting their natural resources. The theoreticians of US imperialism were openly proclaiming its aim of building up a world-wide informal empire. In the beginning of 1941, Henry Morton Luce, the publisher of *Life*, *Time* and other journals, declared in an article entitled "The American Century" in *Life* that the USA should take over world leadership on the basis of its vast power.<sup>(28)</sup>

Perhaps Nehru echoed Henry Luce when he described the next hundred years as "the century of America" in an article "India's Day of Reckoning", which was published in the March 1942 issue of *Fortune* (Chicago).<sup>(29)</sup>

In December 1941, Roosevelt told Churchill that he favoured termination of India's colonial status, to which Churchill reacted strongly. But Roosevelt continued to raise this issue through his personal envoy Harriman as well as through correspondence.<sup>(30)</sup>

The ultimate objective of the US ruling class was to drive out the old imperialist powers like Britain, France and the Netherlands from their colonies and semi-colonies and turn them into parts of their own informal empire. But, during the war, their primary aim was "to uphold the Allied coalition" in order to ensure defeat of the Axis Powers. Only victory in the war would pave the way to the USA's cherished goal -- world domination. As Eugene V. Rostow, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, said later:

"in many ways the whole postwar history has been a process of American movement to take over possessions...of security which Britain, France, the Netherlands and Belgium had previously held."<sup>(31)</sup>

Within the basic framework of this policy and without disrupting the wartime alliance, the USA exerted pressure on her ally to relax Britain's imperialist grip on India.

Col. Louis Johnson, who afterwards became US Defence Secretary, was appointed the US President's Personal Representative in India and came during Cripps' talks with Indian leaders. He tried to mediate when the negotiations seemed to have failed. The Congress Working Committee adopted a resolution on 2 April, rejecting the Cripps proposals, though it was not released to the press until 11 April when the talks finally broke down.<sup>(32)</sup>

The differences actually centred around two issues -- the character of the reconstituted Executive Council of the Viceroy and control over Defence. The Working Committee wanted the Council to work like a *de facto* cabinet with the Viceroy as the constitutional head and sought to have an *effective* control over Defence. But on these issues the British government refused to make any concessions.

On 4 April Johnson wired to Roosevelt and appealed to him for personal intervention with Churchill to prevent a breakdown.<sup>(33)</sup> Nehru met Johnson on 6 April, when Nehru told him that the Congress would not break on the issue of the right of a province not to accede to the Indian Union. "*Nehru had then gone on to*

*speaking of hitching India's wagon to America's star and not Britain's.*" Johnson assured him that the USA, which "would have the leading place at the peace table" after the war, would do its best to enable India to attain "her ambitions", provided India "had wholeheartedly backed the war effort". "But", he warned, "the matter would be far otherwise if she did not." Nehru said that the talks with Cripps would fail "if they were not satisfied" on the issue of Defence. But he promised "to assist the war effort even if the 'Cripps proposals' did not go through." Nehru confessed to Johnson that "he would lose his followers, if he compromised with the British on the Defence issue".(34)

Meeting Cripps on 7 April, Nehru admitted that his "main difficulty" was "fear lest if he accepts office, Gandhi will turn the mass of Congressmen against him".(35)

A new formula on the issue of Defence was devised by Cripps and Johnson to narrow the differences and handed over to the Congress leaders. The Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief Wavell were not consulted. This was too much for Linlithgow who, while appreciating the pressure exerted by Roosevelt's representative on the Congress Working Committee in favour of accepting the offer, very much resented his intervention on the Defence issue.(36)

Though Cripps was very hopeful that the scheme, "largely owing to very efficient and wholehearted help of Col. Johnson", might succeed,(37) it was torpedoed by Churchill, and the concessions made on the Defence issue, the crux of the problem,(38) were withdrawn. With the failure of the negotiations Churchill, Amery, Linlithgow and Co. as well as Gandhi and his closest associates were happy. Though Churchill and Amery believed that the effect in the USA was "wholly beneficial", Roosevelt, who made a last-minute effort to get Cripps' departure from India postponed, held the British solely responsible for the deadlock.(39)

### ***Congress -- A Divided House***

In a letter to Roosevelt on 12 April, Nehru regretted the failure "for the present" of the negotiations and blamed the British government for not permitting the Congress to rouse the people to fight for "the larger causes of freedom and democracy". Yet he assured the President that "still we shall do our utmost not to submit to Japanese or any other aggression and invasion".(40)

At an interview to a *News Chronicle* representative, soon after Cripps' departure, Nehru "tried to represent that though Congress has rejected the Cripps offer, India was willing to help the British". He also promised to make a broadcast from the All India Radio obviously in support of the war efforts and was only dissuaded by Azad from making it.(41) Earlier, on 6 April, Johnson had received the impression from his talks that Nehru would help war efforts "even if the 'Cripps proposals' did not go through".(42) And on 11 April, after the negotiations had fallen through, Johnson reported to the State Department: "I shall have his complete help; *he is our hope here*. I trust him."(43)

When the AICC met at Allahabad at the end of April, Shiva Rao, correspondent of *Hindu* and *Manchester Guardian*, who had close contact with Congress leaders, carried Johnson's message to Nehru, inviting him to pay a short visit to Washington and discuss the Indian problem with Roosevelt. The US mission in Delhi would make all arrangements for his flight to Washington and back. Nehru declined the invitation for fear of strong objection from his Congress colleagues.(44) Before Johnson left India in mid-May, Nehru assured him in a confidential communication that no hindrance would be placed in the way of the Allied forces in India, "no embarrassment of any kind", and production, instead of being interfered with, would be encouraged.(45) After Johnson's departure Nehru maintained cordial relations with the Americans through the American mission in New Delhi.

The invitation to visit the USA for personal contact with Roosevelt came from another American, Claire Boothe Luce, wife of Henry Luce. A member of the U.S. Congress from 1943 to 1947 and, later, an ambassador to Italy, Claire Boothe in her letter of 4 June to Nehru wrote that "the mysterious impact of great personalities" like Roosevelt and Nehru might strike the sparks that would light India on the road to freedom, for "Washington and the White House are deciding the destinies of the nations".(46)



Claire Boothe had come to India, and together with General Brereton, met Nehru(47) before she flew to visit the Chinese front on 2 April with General Stilwell.

Claire Boothe sent a letter, dated 25 August, to Nehru who, then in prison, received it much later. Her messenger was Wendell Willkie, the Republican candidate who lost in the presidential election in 1940 to Roosevelt. Willkie flew round the world in a US military bomber as the President's envoy in 1942-3. The rumour that he might visit India gave the British the jitters and through diplomatic pressure it was prevented.(48) In her letter Claire Boothe greeted Nehru as "the greatest and truest friend that the cause of Democracy and the cause of the United Nations has in all of Asia". She wrote: "The delivery of this letter in India by Mr Wendell Willkie means the thing of greatest importance to us, the United Nations, and to you, the Indian people". What message Willkie would convey to Nehru in a "face to face" talk between the two is not known, but before concluding, she wrote: "The hope that this letter carries is so much greater than any words can express that I feel foolish, inept, trying to put it into any words."(49) In India, the hopes of the US imperialists were pinned on Nehru.

For some time before and after Cripps' departure from India, Nehru went on emphasizing that nothing should be done to embarrass the British war efforts or those of the Americans who would be coming. He wanted "production to go on full speed ahead" and the Indian people "to resist the Japanese to the uttermost", even by resorting to guerrilla war. He told the press that he did not agree with Gandhi on the question of scorched earth policy.(50)

Though Nehru resolved to fight Hitler and Japan, he was not wholly without admiration for Hitler. While expressing his dislike for Hitler's "hideous gospel", he said on 21 February:

"...this can be said to his [Hitler's] credit that he represents something against the defunct order.... *Hitler*, in the way he dealt with unemployment, which England and America failed to solve, *represented some elements of a progressive order*."(51)

On 15 April Gandhi sent a message warning him. "I see no good", he wrote, "in entering into a guerrilla warfare when the American and Chinese forces enter India."(52)

It is worth noting that the Working Committee's resolution rejecting the Cripps proposals agreed in principle to the partition of India. Though the committee stood for the unity of India, the resolution stated:

"Nevertheless the Committee cannot think in terms of compelling the people in any territorial unit to remain in an Indian Union against their declared and established will."

As Sitaramayya observed,

"this passage concedes the division of India into more than one political State and gives the go-by to the unity and integrity of India."(53)

During the negotiations with Cripps, the Congress leaders did not "rule out the Pakistan idea".(54) In his confidential note to Louis Johnson, dated 11 May 1942, Nehru stated:

"While we are entirely opposed to the break-up of India and will try to prevent it, we recognize that in the last resort we cannot compel a territorial unit to remain in the Union against its declared and established will".(55)

It may be noted that in reply to Birla's letter of 14 July 1942, arguing in favour of the partition of India on religious lines, Mahadev, Gandhi's devoted secretary, wrote on 16 July:

"Now about your letter.... Bapu has given it careful attention.... *The question is not of Pakistan or separation as such*, but of the real content of these conception [sic!]."(55a)

Gandhi appeared to have had hardly any objection to the partition of India on religious lines: his concern was about the "content", that is, areas that might be claimed for inclusion within Pakistan.

The view that the Congress leaders felt obliged to accept partition in the interests of communal peace and freedom early in 1947 -- only after communal holocausts had started and after the functioning of the Interim Government in 1946-1947 had revealed to them the impossibility of working with the Muslim League -- a view propagated by Congress leaders like Rajendra Prasad, and others like Sumit Sarkar, is far from correct. The facts are: the Congress leaders exerted as much pressure on the British raj as possible to make a deal with them *alone* and hand over to them an undivided India (of course, within the imperial framework), but as 'freedom' would be the product of negotiations between three parties -- the raj, the Congress and the League -- they were afraid from the time the League raised the demand for separation that "*in the last resort*" they would have to agree to the partition of India on a religious basis. More of it later.

The situation on the war-front grew from bad to worse. Early in April, Colombo, the capital of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Trincomalee, the headquarters of the British fleet, as well as Visakhapatnam and Kakinada in Andhra were bombed by the Japanese. The sea approaches to the Indian coast were commanded by the Japanese fleet. On the basis of a report of a spy about a projected invasion by the Japanese, Madras city was hastily evacuated. In a broadcast on 21 April, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Indian Army warned that "the Japanese may raid India. They may even seek to occupy a portion temporarily..." The British prepared a plan of adopting the scorched earth policy and blowing up even the Tata Iron and Steel Works at Jamshedpur, withdrawing from Assam and Bengal and building a new defence line across Bihar. As D.D. Kosambi wrote, the Japanese "had only to attack immediately in force for the whole of the so-called defence system to crumble..."(56)

The people's anti-British hatred became intense. The government forced people to evacuate their homes on one or two days' notice in many villages in some coastal areas of Bengal. Boats and cycles, the only or main means of communication and transport in many areas, were taken away from the people and their normal lives were disrupted.

When with the Japanese attack, the British fled from Malaya, the Indians there were left to fend for themselves. So with the Japanese occupation of Burma, the Indians there were forced to rely solely on themselves. Streams of refugees -- hundreds of thousands of them -- started on their long trek through inhospitable places into India, and were denied any protection or help by the British. On the contrary, invidious distinction was made between British and Indian evacuees. Separate routes were fixed for the whites and the browns; the former were provided with food, shelter and means of transport while the latter were denied them. Thousands of Indians perished on the 'black road' for want of food and drink and due to diseases. On reaching India, the Indians were discriminated against as usual. Tales of horror to which they had been subjected spread throughout India and added to the people's hatred of the British raj.

Two factors caused resentment among the big bourgeois against the British. Those who had stakes in Malaya and Burma could hardly reconcile themselves to the losses. As the Governor of the Central Provinces, Twynham, wrote to Linlithgow, "the losses incurred in Malaya and Burma have stricken the Baniyas and Marwaris to the soul."(57) Second, the scorched earth policy that the government threatened to pursue in the event of Japanese penetration into India was a nightmare to the tycoons. They could hardly stomach the prospect of seeing their industries going up in flames. Edgar Snow, who met many of them at the time, wrote:

"Indian industrialists and capitalists were among the most suspicious and worried groups. Would not 'scorched earth' ruin their factories?"(58)

Thakurdas strongly criticized the policy at the annual session of the FICCI on 8 March 1942, and the FICCI communicated its opposition to the Viceroy. On 27 March G.L. Mehta, FICCI president, issued a press statement criticizing such a policy.(59) Birla wanted Gandhi to write on 'scorched earth': Mahadev assured him that Gandhi, who was "opposed to a scorched earth policy", would do so.(60) In an article Gandhi

condemned the "Russian technique of scorched earth" and opposed its introduction in India.(61) But for some time he deferred "final judgement" so far as the forcible eviction of people from their homes, seizure of boats, etc., were concerned.(62)

The big compradors had hailed the war and desired it to last long, but such a war as would scorch their factories and reduce them to ashes was not to their taste. The illusion about the invincibility of British arms lay shattered before their eyes. A section of them waited to welcome the Japanese. Walchand Hirachand told Edgar Snow that "As for choice between the British and Japanese, frankly he preferred to take his chance with the latter".(63)

The Congress leadership was a divided house. Gandhi resented Nehru's call for co-operation with British war efforts and advocacy of guerrilla struggle against the Japanese in case of invasion. While warning Nehru, he advised Patel to resign from the Working Committee. He himself decided not to attend the next meeting of the Working Committee and the AICC at Allahabad on 27 April and subsequent days.(64)

Rajagopalachari was full of resentment at the rejection of the Cripps proposals and shared his feelings with the Madras governor, A. Hope. He told the governor that he would break with the Congress to form a new party, if the Working Committee would not reconsider their decision at its next meeting.(65) On his initiative the Madras Congress Legislature Party adopted two resolutions for consideration of the AICC: one, deeply regretting the failure to establish a 'national government' in order to organize effective resistance against an invasion by a foreign aggressor and asking the AICC to accept the League demand for partition of India and not "to sacrifice the chances of the formation of a national government for the doubtful advantage of maintaining a controversy over the unity of India"; the other, proposing the restoration of the ministry in Madras.(66)

Azad had faith in the ultimate victory of the Allies but, unlike Nehru and Rajagopalachari, was for *conditional* co-operation with the British. He was opposed to extending co-operation to the British while they refused to concede any of their demands; he was also opposed to the launching of any anti-British struggle. And he did not agree to the League's demand for partition.

Patel, Prasad, Kripalani, etc., followed Gandhi unhesitatingly.

Gandhi decided to wait no longer. Two factors mainly shaped his decision: one, his conviction that Britain's defeat was imminent; the other, the British cabinet's scheme of allowing option to provinces to secede from the Indian Union. As he told the American journalist and author Louis Fischer, hardly had Cripps gone, the idea of asking the British to withdraw from India immediately "seized hold upon me".(67) The loss of Burma and the retreat of the British army into Egypt, the latest in the unbroken series of military disasters faced by the Allies, coincided with the Cripps visit and the moment of Gandhi's inspiration.

"I have waited long, and I can wait no longer", he asserted.(68) The apostle of non-violence affirmed: "We have to take risk of violence to shake off the great calamity of slavery." He would launch a non-violent movement but if violence broke out in spite of him, then it was God's wish. They would "have to take the risk of anarchy if God wills it". He hoped that "pure ahimsa will arise out of such anarchy".(69)

In the article "Foreign Soldiers in India", Gandhi looked upon "the introduction of foreign soldiers as a positive danger thoroughly to be deplored and distrusted". American aid would amount "in the end to American influence, if not American rule added to British". Second, he asked the British to leave India to her fate *before being forced to do so* as they were forced to leave Singapore. If they did as he desired, "non-violent India would not lose anything. *Probably the Japanese would leave India alone.*" Third, "the Nazi power had risen as a nemesis to punish Britain for her sins of exploitation and enslavement of the Asiatic and African races." Fourth, with the withdrawal of the British, "The fiction of majority and minority will vanish like the mist before the morning sun of liberty. *Truth to tell there will be neither majority nor minority in the absence of the paralysing British arms.*"(70)

Gandhi sent a draft resolution to be placed at the meetings of the Working Committee and the AICC due to meet at Allahabad on 27 and 29 April respectively.

The draft said :

First, "Britain is incapable of defending India."

Second, "Japan's quarrel is not with India" and *"If India were freed her first step would probably be to negotiate with Japan"*. And "if the British withdrew from India, India would be able to defend herself in the event of Japanese or any aggressor attacking India."

Third, "the British should withdraw from India."

*Fourth, on the withdrawal of the British from India the question of majority and minority, "which is a creation of the British Government,...would disappear"*.

Fifth, the draft resolution assured "the Japanese government and people that India bears no enmity either towards Japan or towards any other nation". It asked people "to offer complete non-violent non-co-operation to the Japanese forces" as well as to the British in the event of Japanese invasion and refusal of the British to withdraw.

Sixth, the draft opposed the scorched earth policy so far as it sought to destroy what belonged to or was of use to the masses.

Lastly, the resolution opposed the introduction of foreign soldiers and sought their removal from India.(71)

In a note in *Harijan* Gandhi wrote that it was the British presence which was "the incentive for the Japanese attack". If the incentive were taken away, the Japanese were not likely to attack India. Gandhi repeatedly stressed that when his movement would be launched "only against the British", the Japanese could "expect us to sign a neutrality pact with them". *With the withdrawal of the British it would be possible "to come to terms with Japan"*.(72)

Criticizing Gandhi's draft resolution, which was supported by Patel, Prasad, Kripalani, etc., Nehru said at the Working Committee meeting:

"If Bapu's approach is accepted we become passive partners of the Axis Powers.... the whole thought and background of the draft is one of favouring Japan.... It is Gandhi's feeling that Japan and Germany will win."

Rajagopalachari said :

"Japan will fill the vacuum created by the British withdrawal.... Do not run into the arms of Japan, which is what the resolution comes to."

Sardar Patel warned Nehru and the others who differed:

"We have ever since the outbreak of war tried to pull together. But it may not be possible on this occasion. Gandhiji has taken a definite stand.... I am not in favour of making any approach to Jinnah.... I have placed myself in the hands of Gandhiji. I feel that he is instinctively right, the lead he gives us in all critical situations."

The CSP leaders, Narendra Deb and Achyut Patwardhan, who were among the invitees, supported the draft resolution as amended by Rajendra Prasad.(73)

## Chapter Nine:

### *Partition and Dominion Status*

#### *"A New Chapter of Confidence and Goodwill"*

As the end of the war came near, the British imperialists as well as the Indian leaders and big bourgeois felt afraid of a post-war upheaval and thought of devising means to combat the menace.

In September 1943, Viceroy-designate Wavell and most members of the Indo-Burma Committee of the British War Cabinet were keen on a negotiated settlement with the Indian leaders, for "*our main aim must be to keep India within the Commonwealth*". Their move fell through because of Churchill's opposition. Apprehending a likely "flare-up" in India after the war Wavell complained at a governors' meeting that the British government did not understand the Indian problem as it had failed to understand the Egyptian problem before World War I. To forestall mass struggles after the war he tried to convince Churchill of the immediate need for opening negotiations with Indian leaders and wrote to him on 24 October 1944:

*"If we can secure India as a friendly partner in the British Commonwealth our predominant influence in these countries [Burma, Malaya, etc.] will, I think, be assured: with a lost and hostile India, we are likely to be reduced in the East to the position of commercial bag-men."*(1)

As noted before, Gandhi and the Congress leaders who were outside prison were also hungry for co-operation. The Congress leaders' appraisal of the post-war situation was not different from that of Wavell. Early in January 1945, Bhulabhai Desai, leader of the Congress party in the Central Assembly, pleaded with Wavell that "the continuation of the present situation was more likely than not to lead to an upheaval".(2) Afraid of their own people and aware that the interests of the classes they represented were tied to British imperial interests, they sought immediate understanding with the raj to face the likely post-war upsurge of struggles of the people, who had been dragged down to the lowest depths of want and misery.

In mid-November 1944, with Gandhi's blessings, Bhulabhai Desai entered into an agreement with Liaquat Ali Khan, known as the Desai-Liaquat Pact, and approached the Viceroy for the formation of an interim government on the basis of Congress-League parity, which would "function within the framework of the existing Government of India Act". If formed, it would get the withdrawal of Section 93 from the former Congress provinces, where governments would be constituted on the lines of a coalition -- a League proposal which had been rejected by the Gandhis and Nehrus in 1937 and subsequent years. Wavell informed the Secretary of State that "Desai's proposals fit in with those I submitted months ago..."(3) When Jinnah rejected the agreement and it was criticized by other Congress leaders, Gandhi denied giving his support to it. M.C. Setalvad, a judge of the Bombay High Court, wrote that "Bhulabhai Desai entered into the Pact with the full knowledge, concurrence and encouragement of Gandhi..."(4) During Desai's negotiations with Wavell, Birla saw the Viceroy's private secretary and as Wavell wired to Amery, Birla "was probably sent by Gandhi" and "Birla obviously thought that Coalition Government at [the ] centre under present constitution [was] by no means impossible. He said he was satisfied that *Dominion status should be the aim* and not *repeat not complete independence*. He thought *Gandhi was now of the same opinion*."(5)

A Congress ministry was formed in the NWFP in March 1945, before the Congress Working Committee members were released, and with Congress support a new ministry with the Leaguer, Mohammad Saadulla, as Premier was formed in Assam in the same month.

At the end of the war in Europe, Wavell released the members of the Working Committee and convened a conference at Simla in June-July 1945. As V.P. Menon wrote, the Congress came in for co-operation without any conditions.(6) The Congress leaders were anxious to join the Viceroy's Council "on the basis that they would whole-heartedly co-operate in supporting and carrying through the war against Japan to its



victorious conclusion". (The Congress leaders', including Gandhi's, faith in the creed of non-violence was remarkably flexible.) Nehru felt overjoyed: "We feel", he said, "we must succeed at Simla....I am very hopeful." [\(7\)](#)

Wavell asked the Congress and the League to suggest names of members of the reconstituted Council. The panel submitted by the Congress included the name of Shyamaprasad Mukherjee, Hindu Mahasabha president. The Simla Conference foundered on the rock of the League's claim to nominate all the Muslim members of the Council. But so far as the British imperialists were concerned, it did not fail. It cast the Congress leaders in the role of accomplices who would work shoulder to shoulder with the raj to put out the flames of anti-imperialist struggle.

After the Simla conference was over, Wavell

"assured them [Gandhi and Azad] that even if a final constitutional settlement failed to materialize, he would see to it that an interim Government is formed at the centre out of the elements prepared to co-operate".

He wanted the Congress leaders to "see to it that a peaceful atmosphere is preserved in the country".

The Congress president wrote to him:

*"the contacts established between the Congress and the Government had largely allayed past bitterness, and marked the beginning of a new chapter of confidence and goodwill."*

Nehru said : "In spite of our sincere efforts, we have not succeeded but there is no ground for despondency and despair." He hoped : "I do not know how things will shape themselves. The Viceroy may take some further step, as he hinted..." [\(8\)](#)

The Congress leaders felt a surge of "confidence and goodwill" for the raj while the wounds inflicted by it on the people were still fresh.

The British Labour Party won the general elections in July and this was hailed by Birla's *Hindustan Times*, the unofficial Congress organ, as "the downfall of India's oppressors". On assuming office the Labour Party announced elections to central and provincial legislative assemblies in India. Summing up the views of the provincial governors at their conference early in August, Wavell said: "We should endeavour to retain the initiative and to divert political energy into legitimate channels." Election seemed the first step. [\(9\)](#)

Close co-operation between the raj and Indian big bourgeois and Congress leaders had already started. Sir Ardeshir Dalal, one of the Tata directors and an author of the Bombay Plan, so much lauded by Nehru, had been appointed a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council in charge of planning and development early in June 1944. In mid-May 1945 the government arranged the visit of a delegation of Indian industrialists led by Birla and J.R.D. Tata to Britain and the USA for exploring chances of collaboration with the British and US monopoly capital. The raj regularly invited discussions with Congress leaders on constitutional questions, the future administrative set-up, "a scheme of army reorganization" and other matters like education, industry and planning. For instance, Nehru was being consulted on constitutional issues and army reorganization; Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Zakir Hussain, intimately associated with the Congress leaders, went to England "on some education committee of which Sargent was chairman". "Except in politics", wrote Guy Wint, "British-Indian rapprochement is making very helpful progress." [\(10\)](#)

Beset with sharp contradictions, the British imperialists sought to forge a new kind of relationship with India, under which their economic, political and strategic interests would remain secure. Their only hope lay in adjusting their relations with the classes -- the classes that were dependent on them for their growth and development -- and in giving them the reins of administration while exercising control from behind. As R.J. Moore observes,

"Labour favoured an early withdrawal not only because the party was pledged to it, but because it would best serve Britain's own interests. The co-operation of Congress...seemed necessary to the preservation of the now uncertain internal order and the security of the Indian Ocean area.... The best security for commercial and financial interests lay in an orderly transfer and the continuation of the collaborative arrangements that had prospered before and during the war (when leading magnates were associated with government)." [\(11\)](#)

British imperialism emerged victorious out of World War II but far weaker economically, politically and militarily than US imperialism and the erstwhile Soviet Union. Much of its industry was shattered and its capital investments in Canada and the USA were taken over by the latter. For its post-war reconstruction it was dependent on US aid and loan-capital.

On the other hand, World War II was the 'Best of Wars' for US monopoly capital. In his *The Struggle for the World*, published in 1947, James Burnham wrote of "an American Empire which will be, *if not literally worldwide in formal boundaries, capable of exercising decisive world control*. Nothing less than this can be the positive or offensive phase of a national United States policy." He added: "There is already an American empire, greatly expanded during these past years." [\(12\)](#) An article and map based on Burnham's book were carried by *Life*, Henry Luce's journal.

The contradiction between British and US imperialism became acute in the post-war years. Under the Anglo-US Financial Agreement of December 1945 the USA extended a loan to Britain to assist in her post-war reconstruction on condition that Britain would end by mid-1947 the "Empire dollar pool" and eventually the system of Imperial preferences. The US demand for liquidation of Britain's direct rule in India became insistent. [\(13\)](#) The USA was "making sheep's eyes" not only at vital British oil reserves in the Middle East, as Churchill insinuated, but also at India, "the jewel in the crown of the British Empire". The enlightened section of the British imperialists -- the Labourites -- realized that the post-war situation would not permit them to maintain the old imperial structure of domination. With the change in the situation, relations with the colonies had to be restructured, if the British strategic and economic interests were to be defended against the mounting offensives not only of the people of India but of the USA as well as the growing world-wide forces of national liberation and socialism.

Like the spectre of the USA's 'Manifest Destiny', the spectre of Communism also was haunting the raj, as it haunted all other imperialists and reactionaries. The emergence of the Soviet Union with its power and glory greatly enhanced, the collapse of different reactionary regimes in Eastern Europe, the heroic advance of the People's Liberation Army and expansion of Red bases in China, and the armed national liberation struggles in Indo-China and Indonesia were contributing to the revolutionary ferment in India and accelerating the change in her political climate. India was loud with protests against the despatch of Indian troops by the raj to defeat the national liberation wars in Indo-China and Indonesia and restore them to the old colonial masters -- the French and the Dutch respectively. At the San Francisco Conference in 1945, Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov declared:

"We have at this conference an Indian delegation, but India is not an independent state. We all know that the time will come when the voice of independent India will be heard too."

Like the imperialists, Indian reactionaries too were worried. In a note enclosed with his letter of 20 August 1945 to the Secretary of State, Shiva Rao warned:

"the influence of the communist element in India, particularly in the Trade Unions, has been growing since 1941. Russia has expressed active interest in her independence (through Molotov at San Francisco) and in that of all colonial areas." [\(14\)](#)

As Gary Hess writes,

"The spectre of communist influence, seemingly certain to increase as long as the British held onto power, added another compelling reason for the United States to encourage a quick and orderly withdrawal."

At the cabinet meeting on 4 April 1945, Churchill "spoke of the difficult and unfriendly attitude of Russia since the Yalta conference; of the mighty military power of the USA; and hence the need for Empire unity".<sup>(15)</sup>

Another contradiction which beset British imperialism was with its own people. With the end of the war the British youth became sick of it and felt no inclination to serve in distant lands and shed their blood for the profit and power of their capitalists. Those who had joined the armed forces demanded speedy demobilization and mutinied in some places to realize their demand. The British rulers were often heard to bewail the shortage of manpower to preserve the empire.

But of all the contradictions with which British imperialism was faced in the immediate post-war years, its contradiction with the Indian people was, no doubt, the principal one. In the winter months of 1945-6, India, as Penderel Moon said, was on the "Edge of a Volcano".

### *Elections*

In the meantime, to refurbish their own image, which had been tarnished by the repudiation of all responsibility for the 'Quit India' movement, Gandhi's condemnation of underground activities and his instruction to underground workers to surrender,<sup>(16)</sup> Nehru, Patel and some others, especially Nehru, did some sabre-rattling during the election campaign. They claimed full credit for the August rebellion; predicted the end of British rule within a short time; denied the possibility of a compromise with the League; and demanded investigations into the atrocities committed by the minions of law and order during the struggle and their punishment. The Secretary of State for India, Lord Pethick-Lawrence, dismissed these as part of electioneering. Birla hastened to assure Pethick-Lawrence and Stafford Cripps that there "is no political leader including Jawaharlal who wants to see any crisis or violence" and that "everyone is anxious for settlement". He explained that "*even leaders are often led*".<sup>(17)</sup>

The Congress election manifesto was drafted to sound as progressive as possible. For the first time the Congress promised in the election manifesto for the provincial assembly elections to abolish zamindari but assured the zamindars that they would be compensated. It stated that the future constitution should be a federal one with autonomy for its constituent units. The election campaign was fought by the Congress on the issue of Indian unity and by the Muslim League on the issue of Pakistan and its sole right to represent the Muslims.

In the elections to the Central Assembly the Congress won an overwhelming majority of general (that is Hindu) seats: all Hindu Mahasabha candidates were routed. Patel had wanted uncontested election of Hindu Mahasabha president Shyamaprasad Mukherji,<sup>(18)</sup> but the Bengal Congress, then dominated by Sarat Bose, put up a candidate against him. Shyamaprasad, for whom the Congress high command had developed affection, could not escape defeat and save his deposit. The Muslim League won all the Muslim seats in the Central Assembly, obtaining 90 per cent of the votes cast.

In the provincial assembly elections, which took place early in 1946, the successes of the Congress and the League were almost equally spectacular. All Hindu Mahasabha candidates were defeated, except Shyamaprasad who won from a pocket constituency. When the Muslim League wave was sweeping through India and Bengal, Fazlul Huq was returned to the Bengal Assembly with five companions of his, defeating the League.

The Congress formed ministries in eight provinces and the League in Bengal and Sind. The leader of the Muslim League Assembly Party in Bengal had proposed the formation of a coalition ministry with the Congress but the Congress high command was opposed to it. Thanks to the Congress high command,

Muslim League ministries had functioned in Bengal from 1937 to 1946 with a break for a little over a year. As Abul Hashim, then general secretary of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League said,

"They kept out accredited Hindu leaders from the governments. There were two or three Hindu ministers but they did not represent their community.... We were fully conscious of its inevitable reaction, which ultimately led to the partition of Bengal in August 1947. We decided [in early 1946] to constitute a coalition ministry with the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha. *The Congress high command did not agree.* They apprehended that if there was a coalition between the Muslim League and the Congress in Bengal, the All India Muslim League would demand similar coalitions in other provinces of India."

It was the Congress leaders' obsessive desire to have a monopoly of power at the Centre and in the Hindu-majority provinces that stood in the way of a settlement with the League -- a settlement which would have averted the 'Great Calcutta killing' of mid-August 1946 and later more appalling holocausts, the partition of India and the dismemberment of Bengal and Punjab.

Even after the riots in Calcutta, Noakhali and Bihar in 1946 -- in early November that year -- Muslim League leaders of Bengal met Gandhi at the residence of Suhrawardy, Bengal's prime minister, in Calcutta with the proposal for a coalition government in Bengal. But "Mr Gandhi said that he preferred a one-party government to a coalition government." [\(18a\)](#) Gandhi left for Noakhali on an ostensible mission of restoring communal peace there after blasting all hopes of bringing about communal harmony even at that late hour.

In the Punjab, though the Muslim League party was the biggest single party in the assembly, the Congress formed a coalition with the Akali Party, a party of Sikh communalists, and the Unionist Party, a party dominated by pro-imperialist big landlords of Punjab. This unprincipled alliance was one more instance among countless ones which exposed the hollowness of the Congress leaders' claim that it was their anti-imperialist and anti-feudal crusading zeal that had not allowed them to form coalition with the League in 1937 and after. The Unionist Khizar Hayat Khan, leader of a small minority party, headed the Punjab ministry with the support of the Congress. Before the elections, the Congress had poured funds to get Muslim candidates under different banners elected, but all Congress-supported Muslim candidates in different provinces were defeated. [\(19\)](#)

## Chapter Ten

### The Role of the CPI: From Outbreak of War to Transfer of Power

#### *The Imperialist War Phase*

When the war broke out, the CPI, like all communists elsewhere, described it as an imperialist war -- a war between rival imperialisms for a redivision of the world. It led a one-day political strike of 90,000 workers in Bombay against the war on 2 October 1939. It held that the imperialist war would give rise to revolution in capitalist countries as well as in colonies and semi-colonies.

But the CPI was least prepared for organizing or leading any revolutionary struggle. During the years from 1936 to 1939, it had sought to rally the workers, peasants and the petty bourgeoisie behind the Congress leadership. Instead of clarifying the issues before the people and breaking their illusions about the Congress leadership, it strengthened their illusions. As Joshi, the CPI General Secretary, lamented early in 1940,

"The bourgeoisie dominated the national movement and it would not launch a struggle; the proletariat, the only truly revolutionary class, was too weak to initiate one on its own." [\(1\)](#)

The source of this weakness was the CPI itself, supposed to be the vanguard of the proletariat.

Speaking of Gandhi's strategy after outbreak of the war, Adhikari said:

"Firstly it [Gandhi's strategy] will mean that the revolutionary vanguard is decimated in isolation through imperialist repression.... Shorn of its moral embellishment, it [Gandhism] is the line of the cowardly and compromising bourgeoisie.... It is seeking to use its position to overtake and imprison the rapidly growing forces of revolution, to isolate and eliminate them. It is paving the way for the most ignoble compromise and defeat at a time when all the factors [except a revolutionary party] are favourable for decisive victory over Imperialism."<sup>(2)</sup>

Yet the CPI leadership showed little inclination to climb out of the morass of opportunism where it had been wallowing. A few weeks before the war started, it had formulated the policy of rallying communists, socialists, peasants, students and workers into a united front of leftists, powerful enough *to direct "Congress policy by pressure from below instead of control from above"* when the crisis broke..."<sup>(3)</sup> After the outbreak of the war, the CPI leadership, despite the realization that the Gandhian leadership wanted to shackle all struggles and worked for "the most ignoble compromise and defeat", affirmed that "*a national struggle today was a practical possibility only through the Congress. The Congress had to be led into action.*" The CPI strategy was to create the necessary pressure *from below* to compel the leadership of the Congress to issue the call for an anti-imperialist struggle.<sup>(4)</sup> According to Joshi, national unity was "embodied in the Congress". He condemned Subhas and the Forward Bloc for proposing to launch a struggle without the sanction of the Congress leadership and accused him of disrupting "the very organ of struggle", which was the Congress, though experience showed that the Congress, instead of being the organ of struggle, was opposed to it. The signals that were coming from afar were not particularly helpful. Even in the months after the war had begun, Soviet spokesmen described the Congress as "the organization of the anti-imperialist front, which embodies the leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle".<sup>(5)</sup>

The CPI raised the slogan -- '*na ek pai, na ek bhai*', neither any monetary contribution nor any participation in the war as a recruit. On the occasion of the Congress session at Ramgarh in March 1940, it brought out a pamphlet entitled "The Proletarian Path". The "immediate task", according to it, was "conquest of power by the Indian people".<sup>(6)</sup> To fulfil this task, the "first steps" would be "political general strike in the major industries together with country-wide no-rent and no-tax action". The next step would be a "nation-wide armed insurrection", which would overthrow colonial rule. The CPI's programme included the establishment of a "Democratic Republic of the People", a "People's Army", etc. Its "proletarian path" was modelled on the Russian revolution and destined to remain a grandiose plan on paper. The CPI did very little theoretical work on the complex problems of the Indian revolution as it always looked up to foreign mentors for guidance. The CPI leadership ignored the uneven social, economic and political development in this vast country and failed to understand that no nation-wide insurrection was possible. The CPI leadership actually paid lip-service to revolution instead of seriously meaning it. If it was really serious, it would have done some theoretical work and, while organizing the working class and other revolutionary classes, would have given priority to arousing and organizing the peasants, particularly in those areas which were the enemy's weakest links in the chain of political domination, develop and expand the struggle and carry on a protracted war for seizure of country-wide power. Most lamentably, the CPI leadership never took the work among the peasantry, the main force of the Indian revolution, seriously.

Interestingly, while "The Proletarian Path" decried Gandhism as "the most disruptive, most demoralizing, most anti-struggle force within the National Congress", it hoped "to build up the Congress as the organ of people's movement"!

In March 1940, there was a general strike of textile workers in Bombay, which was led by the CPI. Arrests of communists started. By early 1941 the CPI was crippled by the arrests. Its illusion about Nehru faded away for the time being. In October 1940, while accusing the Gandhian leadership of sabotaging the national struggle, it criticized Nehru, too. Nehru's role, it said, was "to bark at the Communists and to hang revolutionary drapings round the Working Committee's resolutions".<sup>(7)</sup>



At its Nagpur session in December 1940, the All India Students Federation split over the question whether to accept Gandhi's recommendation that students should shun politics. The AISF, led by the communists, meeting separately, questioned the Congress claim to speak for the whole of India, condemned the Muslim League's 'Pakistan' demand as well as the Hindu Mahasabha's 'Hindustan' slogan as reactionary and disruptive, and stood for a "*voluntary federation of regional states* based on mutual confidence" instead of a unitary India.(8)

### **"People's War"**

The Nazi blitzkrieg against the Soviet Union marked a new phase of World War II. Though an alliance was formed between imperialist Britain and the Soviet Union, which was soon joined by the U.S.A., the question was whether the character of the war had changed from an imperialist to a people's war, when the people of the whole world were threatened by the menace of slavery to the fascists.

At first the CPI did not recognize any change in the character of the war. Its Polit Bureau issued a pamphlet in July, which held that the war continued to be an imperialist war and stated that the Indian people could "help in the just war which the Soviet Union is waging...by fighting all the more vigorously for their own emancipation from the imperialist yoke" and that they "can render fully effective aid to the Soviet Union only as a free people".(9) For some time the CPI policy remained unchanged.

In a statement made in July 1941 on the colonies and the war, the CPGB said that the colonial people "will understand the need for immediate building of a great united front for the defeat of Hitler" and that opposition to the war was "detrimental to the true interests of the Indian people".(10)

In *Labour Monthly* of September 1941, Palme Dutt wrote:

"The interest of the people of India and Ireland and of all the colonial peoples, as of all the peoples of the world, is bound up with the victory of the peoples against Fascism; that interest is absolute and unconditional, and does not depend on any measures their rulers may promise or concede."(11)

According to Overstreet and Windmiller, an article by I. Lemin, entitled "The Role of the British Empire in the Current War", appeared in the September 1941 issue of *Bolshevik*, the organ of the CPSU(B). It assigned to the British empire "the highest place side by side with the U.S.S.R." in the "great coalition of democratic peoples" fighting fascism. Pointing out that India had not yet mobilized its forces for the war effort, it stated: "The further the mobilization of these forces for struggle against Hitlerite fascism proceeds, the better."(12)

Then in the course of his speech on 6 November 1941, Stalin said that "all honest people must support the armies of the U.S.S.R., Great Britain and other Allies, as armies of liberation".(13)

By November 1941, rethinking started within the underground CPI. It was in mid-December that the Polit Bureau recognized in a resolution that with the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union the war had been transformed from an imperialist to a people's war, and undertook to organize a People's War movement.(14)

In a Party letter, dated December 1941, the CPI leadership acknowledged that British comrades had corrected them. They circulated among their members along with the Party letter "two important documents which the British Communist Party published in the very first month after Hitler's attack upon the Soviet Union" and which had just reached them.(15)

A lengthy note from imprisoned Communist leaders, known as the jail document or Deoli thesis, was smuggled out. It also emphasized the change in the character of the war and strongly urged a change in the Party line.(16)

Though the new line met with some opposition from the party ranks,(17) the CPI leadership tried to implement it on different fronts. At its session in Patna in December 1941, the All India Students Federation

adopted the new line. The communists also pushed it through the All India Kisan Sabha executive. But Nehru's opposition at the Kanpur session of the AITUC did not allow the communists to get it adopted by that body.

When Stafford Cripps came, the CPI greeted the British constitutional proposals "as a suitable basis for a settlement, inadequate though they are" and appealed to the Congress and the League to set up a 'national government' to rally the people for defence.

To help those friends who were negotiating with the government for the release of communist prisoners, the party drafted a "Memorandum on Communist Policy and Plan of Work"<sup>(18)</sup> for the consideration of the authorities. Among other things, it gave the government the assurance that all communists -- those who were underground and those who were in prisons or detention camps, if released -- would help "existing war-efforts" in every way possible.

In May an Intelligence official and Home Member Maxwell interviewed Joshi separately. Joshi gave them all assurances of help and co-operation.<sup>(19)</sup> While seeking release of his comrades, he told the Intelligence official that the release might depend on their signing the "Memorandum", that is, on giving an undertaking to help "existing war-efforts".<sup>(20)</sup> Joshi told Maxwell that when Russia became involved in the war, "it became apparent that the object of the allied nations was to fight a war on behalf of world liberation and freedom..." When Maxwell suggested that after the defeat of the fascist powers the Allied governments like that of Britain might pursue their old policies, Joshi dismissed such a suggestion and asserted: "*World freedom would in fact be established by an Allied victory*".<sup>(21)</sup> Both of them noted that Joshi was not much interested in Kisans and their grievances.<sup>(22)</sup>

In July 1942 the ban on the CPI was lifted by the government and the release of communist prisoners started.

At the AICC meeting in Bombay on 7 and 8 August, which passed the 'Quit India' resolution, communist members moved amendments which were rejected. One such amendment urged the Congress to take the initiative in building a united national front of parties and sections of people who wanted to secure India's immediate freedom and who were prepared to participate in or support the formation of a 'National Government' which would undertake the organization of armed as well as non-violent defence against Fascist aggressors in close co-operation with the United Nations and their armies.<sup>(23)</sup>

The communist leaders held that it was the bounden duty of India's working class to defend the Soviet Union, the land where Socialism had emerged and which was fighting a grim war against fascism. In *Forward to Freedom* by Joshi, which appeared in February 1942 under the pen-name Hansraj, Joshi characterized the war as "the war of world liberation". He affirmed that the united Indian people's participation in the world-wide anti-fascist war led by the Soviet Union and its victory would *automatically* liberate India and the world from the imperialist yoke.<sup>(24)</sup> He also theorized that *the Anglo-American imperialists had been "passing more and more into the grip of people's unity"* (the words quoted are all in capital letters in the original) and that the people "are now in a position to seize the government by the scruff and make it do their bidding..."<sup>(25)</sup> The strength of the imperialist rulers", affirmed Joshi, "is the same in all the colonies: Nil."<sup>(26)</sup> There was also glowing praise of Chiang Kai-shek.<sup>(27)</sup> There was some fulsome eulogy of the Congress, too. About the League, Joshi wrote that it "is to the Muslim masses what the Congress is to the Indian people as a whole". He further asserted that the Congress "remains the main army of the national movement", "the organized embodiment of India's will to freedom".<sup>(28)</sup>

The underestimation of world imperialism and the refusal to analyse the class character of the leaders of the Congress and the League were products of the same vice -- the CPI leaders' deep-seated opportunism. As we shall see, throughout this period until 1947, they made statements and put forward arguments which smacked of infantile disorder, in order to evade the responsibility of organizing and leading a revolutionary struggle.

The CPI envisaged that there would be no need for revolutionary struggle to achieve India's freedom. According to it, the key to national independence was national unity, the basis of which was Congress-League unity. Once the Congress and the League united and, together with others, formed a 'national government' (under the British aegis), and rallied all forces for national defence in co-operation with the Allied forces against Japan, the 'national government' would be able "to take our war out of imperialist hands" and achieve "our liberation by leading India into the world war of liberation".<sup>(29)</sup> The CPI leadership was ecstatic over the 'National Government' which, if formed, would necessarily be a product of compromise with British imperialism. In order to build national unity, the CPI campaigned to persuade the Congress to accept the 'essence' of the Pakistan demand.

In September 1942, when an insurrectionary situation had developed in large parts of the country in response to the 'Quit India' slogan, an enlarged plenum of the CPI Central Committee adopted a political resolution which blamed imperialist repression and "mad patriots" for the 'Quit India' movement, for sabotage and disruption. It held that "the fifth column elements and fascist agents" were taking advantage of the situation and the plenum resolved to fight them on different fronts. It undertook to "organize a countrywide campaign for national unity", based on Congress-League unity. It would explain "what is just in this Pakistan demand" and stress "the urgency of the Congress conceding the right of self-determination of the *Muslim nationalities*", including the right of separation.<sup>(30)</sup> In another resolution the plenum stated that while seeking satisfaction of the partial demands of the workers, the Party's task would be "to mobilize the entire working class through the trade unions for our patriotic policy on production..."<sup>(31)</sup>

Earlier, in the "Memorandum on Communist Policy and Plan of Work" of April 1942, the CPI leaders had assured the raj that if the Government released imprisoned communists and recognized trade unions, "*it will have no need to fear strikes as far as we Communists can help it*". They had undertaken also to "work out schemes for speeding up production and launch mass drives calling upon the workers to speed up production..."<sup>(32)</sup>

In an article on the decisions of a plenary session of the Central Committee, which met in February 1943, P.C. Joshi wrote that the 'Quit India' "struggle failed, as it was bound to fail, because it was not national struggle but nation-wide sabotage". As it became usual with the CPI, Joshi condemned the C.S.P. and Forward Bloc workers as 'fifth columnists' deluding "mad patriots". The way out of the crisis was to get Gandhi released. Gandhi had already decried underground activities and violence and was expected by the CPI to break the stalemate by opening negotiations with the Government and the Muslim League. It shifted the responsibility for the 'Quit India' struggle to the shoulders of the 'saboteurs' and 'fifth-columnists' and trailed behind the big bourgeois leadership of the Congress as well as behind British imperialism.

To shield the government from the anger of the people, prevent food riots, etc., when food scarcity was getting acute and food prices were shooting up, for which Government policies and the insatiable greed of hoarders were responsible, the CPI Central Committee decided to launch a 'Food Campaign' and a 'Grow More Food Campaign'. Besides, they decided to launch a 'Production Campaign' for more production in factories and for prevention of strikes as far as possible when workers were being ruthlessly exploited.

The CPI leaders wanted the party to serve "as the crusader for national unity which acts as the bridge between the premier political organizations of our people, the Congress and the League", and which "*seeks nothing for itself except to be acclaimed as a young brother party*..."<sup>(33)</sup> This kind of stuff was being poured out by the CPI leaders. In the name of coming to the aid of the Soviet Union, they had abandoned Marxism.

The CPI leaders acclaimed not only the Congress but also the League as an anti-imperialist, freedom-loving organization. Their adulation of the Congress and Congress leaders, mainly Gandhi and Nehru, as well as of the League and Jinnah was sickening.

The first Congress of the CPI was held in Bombay from 23 May to 1 June 1943. To quote from the *Indian Annual Register*,

"On either side of the dais...were hung two big portraits of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Mr M.A. Jinnah against the background of the Congress and Muslim League flags respectively." (34)

This was symbolic of the rank opportunism of the CPI leaders and their desertion of Marxism-Leninism. It is significant that in a reprint of Stalin's Report to the Sixteenth Congress of the CPSU(B), Adhikari deleted Stalin's references to Gandhi "as a liberal compromiser in the service of the imperialist bourgeoisie against the colonial national-revolutionary movement". (35) This reflected not only the political attitude but also the political dishonesty of the CPI leadership.

The CPI Congress adopted a political resolution and a new Party Constitution. The political resolution "Forward to Unity in Action" said: "Our people must unite to defend the Motherland, shoulder to shoulder with the peoples of the United Nations. That *alone* leads to freedom." It stated:

"The basic slogan of today is national unity for national defence to win National Government of national defence. To implement this slogan, to win National Government the urgent need today is to build unity in action for defence, food and production. That *alone* would lead to freedom and victory." (36)

The resolution blamed the Congress leadership for the 'Quit India' resolution, which had been 'exploited' by the CSP and the Forward Bloc -- the 'fifth column'. They were held responsible not only for causing widespread sabotage and anarchy but also for accentuating the food crisis as well as the crisis on the production front. The CPI congratulated itself on its "heroic fight against the Fifth Column".

As Home Secretary Tottenham noted in his circular to all provincial governments, the CPI leaders had become bolder and more self-confident and chided both the Congress and the League for their "negative policy" which did not allow them to unite. The CPI also criticized its own "left nationalist deviations": it had concentrated on "wordy abuse" of the bureaucracy while failing to expose the "negative and defeatist policy" of the national leadership; overemphasized the repression theme; and in its food campaign wrongly aimed at exposing bureaucratic inefficiency. As official documents including Tottenham's circular noted, this criticism of the government had been intended "to catch the public ear", "to retain a national and popular appeal". (37) Interestingly, the Home Department's "Communist Survey, April-June 1943" observed:

"*People's War* [the CPI organ] may in future be more critical of Congress, but it is evident that it will at the same time aim at reducing the risk of reprisals by blending such criticism with a sickly adulation of the 'great' Congress and its leaders." (38)

The Party Congress decided "to popularize the Allied armies in India as the defenders of the country and organize 'anti-fascist cultural patriotic squads' to raise the morale of the troops". (39) Significantly, the new Party constitution dispensed with an illegal apparatus and formed the basis of a purely *legal* communist party. It appears that the Party felt no need for going underground again in future, for combining legal with illegal activities.

Ranadive presented a long report "Working Class and National Defence" at the Party Congress. The substance of that report was that the workers, though driven to "hellish" and "intolerable" conditions by their employers who were reaping super-profits as well as by the government, must not go on strikes to improve their conditions, for that would mean stabbing the country "for the misdeeds of selfish employers"; instead, they should organize themselves and co-operate with the employers and the government to produce more. The task of the communists was to prevent strikes -- and break them, if they occurred in spite of the communists -- and get the workers to maximize production and avoid waste. (40)

To meet the acute food crisis, when prices of food had soared and were soaring still higher, the political resolution urged the formation of representative food committees to have control over stocks, etc., and co-operate in official schemes. Popular anger was sought to be diverted against hoarders alone and not against the policies of the raj and landlordism, main causes of the crisis. In his "Report on Reformist Deviation" of 1948, Randive wrote that in a party letter dated 4 October 1943, praise was showered on even big landlords

and moneylenders.(41) The peasants were advised to grow more food for national defence and freedom. The demands of the poor and landless peasants for land reform, fair wages, etc., were ignored.

The political resolution claimed that the Party membership had leapt up from 4,464 in July 1942 to 15,563 on 1 May 1943 --a spectacular achievement. A Party letter subsequently expected the membership to rise to 56,000 by the end of the year. A Central Committee of 22 members was elected. Joshi, Adhikari and Ranadive formed the Political Bureau of the Central Committee and Joshi continued to be the secretary.

In "Congress and Communists", which appeared in November 1944, Joshi was confident that the achievement of national unity would be followed by a political settlement with Britain. It would be in the interests of Britain to arrive at such a settlement, for without it the war would be more prolonged and demand more sacrifices from her people. Moreover, to quote Joshi, "a prosperous postwar Britain can be built only in alliance with a free India with its expanding market..."(42) In another lengthy article "Victory -- Whose?" which was first published in *People's War* of 20 May 1945, after the Allied victory over Germany, Joshi made many interesting formulations. He said:

"Europe after the last war was the cockpit of imperialist powers, but Europe after this war has slipped out of imperialist hands into the hands of its own people".(43)

About the U.S.A., he stated that "Reactionary forces in the U.S. suffered a decisive defeat in the Presidential election;..." and that "The American ruling-class are not out to build a colonial empire; they want markets".(44)

Joshi expected the British Labour Party to win in the next general election, to "*build a People's Britain*", and *liberate India and the colonies*. "Independent India", he wrote, "will be prosperous India and a good market. Thus if the British people fight for their bread, they will have to agree to our freedom too!... British bread and Indian freedom go together."(45) This General Secretary of the CPI preached that no revolutionary struggle would be necessary to achieve India's freedom, that there would be peaceful transition from colonial slavery to independence.

Joshi asserted that a united national movement in India would lead to the formation of a provisional 'National Government', which would not only build a wonderful India but "rush increased aid to China", reconcile the Kuomintang with the Communist Party of China and help her to shorten her agonies under Japan and escape U.S. domination after the war! What was needed was Congress-League unity.

The CPI leadership betrayed a woeful lack of understanding of the nature of imperialism and chose to remain blind to the class character of the Congress and League leaders. The enormous literature they produced in a verbose, self-righteous and boastful style was imbued with deep opportunism -- a besetting vice of theirs with which they were afflicted in 1936 and of which they never got cured. Instead of arousing and organizing the people for political, revolutionary tasks, they pursued a non-class, anti-struggle (except against militant political workers and "traitor Bose") line and did whatever they could to fill the people's minds with complacency. It is no wonder that, when in the post-war days the struggles of the people broke out, the CPI failed miserably.

### ***What Went Wrong with People's War***

It appears that the characterization of the war after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union as people's war was not wrong. Nothing could be a greater calamity for the people of the world than the victory of the Axis Powers -- Germany, Japan and Italy. World War II passed through several phases. In the beginning it was an imperialist war. The situation changed when the Soviet Union was attacked, and when, soon after, Japan entered the war and overran the countries of South-East Asia. At this phase the contradiction between India and British imperialism, then an ally of the Soviet Union, became secondary and the contradictions between the Soviet Union (and China) and the Axis powers and then the contradiction between the Indian people and Japanese militarism became primary. The situation again changed in late 1942 or early 1943 when the



victory of the Soviet Union and other Allied Powers over the Axis Powers was assured. The alliance between the Soviet Union and the imperialist powers was only temporary and the contradictions between them became more and more manifest as the victorious end of the war came nearer. The CPI leadership overlooked this aspect. If it did not, it would have to assume the responsibility of organizing the people for the national democratic revolution at the appropriate time, which it was reluctant to do. It seems it was haunted by the fear of revolution throughout this period.

The optimism that all the Allied Powers were fighting for world liberation and that their victory would *automatically* lead to India's freedom was indeed a product of infantile reformist disorder. Even such nonsense was preached that the British and U.S. imperialists had become prisoners in the hands of the people. Such optimism was not dispelled even by Churchill's declaration in September 1941 that the Atlantic Charter did not apply to India and other British colonies or the later declaration on 10 November 1942 that he had "not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire".

It is worth noting that on 12 October 1942 Mao Tsetung hailed the Soviet victory achieved on 9 October in the protracted, bitter battle of Stalingrad as a turning point in the world war. To quote him, "In short, after October 9 there is only one road open to Hitler, the road to extinction." He also noted the contradictions within the Allied camp. He referred to Britain's and the U.S.A.'s delaying to open the second front. He said: "On the western front, even if Britain and the United States continue their policy of looking on and stalling, the second front will eventually be opened, when the time comes to belabour the slain tiger." [\(46\)](#)

The CPI leaders failed to realize that the contradiction between the Indian people and British imperialism would become primary in the phase that was opening. They did not change the direction of their policies in time to prepare for the post-war upsurge of the people's struggles. As seen before, both the British and the Congress leaders anticipated and prepared for the post-war upheaval, but not the CPI.

Instead, the CPI as led by the Joshis trailed behind the British raj as well as behind the leaders of the Congress and the League. While slandering many patriots as "fifth columnists" it indulged in sickening adulation of the Congress leaders who had been waiting before the 'Quit India' struggle to make terms with the Japanese.

Dissociating itself from Gandhi's gamble in 1942 does not appear to have been wrong. But the alternative to opposition to Gandhi's manoeuvre was not surrender to imperialism and co-operation with it as its underling. Mao Tsetung had been putting in practice his theory of revolution in colonies and semi-colonies since 1928. His writings in which his theory was elaborated -- the strategy, the tactics, the military line, etc. -- had already come out. By 1942 the Communist Party of China, fighting single-handed against the Japanese fascists and other very heavy odds, had established extensive liberated areas by acting according to Mao Tsetung's theory. But the CPI leadership did not think it worthwhile to learn from China's experience. As noted before, the most lamentable fact was that the CPI leadership hardly ever gave the importance to the peasant question in India, which it deserved. The alternative to surrender to the raj and to what the CPI called "national leadership" was learning from China's experience and arousing and organizing the peasantry, without neglecting the working class and other revolutionary sections of the people, for the liberation war when the conditions for it would mature.

In a brief message to the Central Committee of the CPI dated Yenai, 5 April 1943, Mao Tsetung on behalf of the Central Committee, CPC, reminded the former that the victory in the anti-fascist war was near, and said:

"We believe that under the concerted efforts of the Communist Party of India and the Indian people, a way will certainly be found out of the present difficult situation so that both the objects -- to vanquish fascism and strive for Indian independence -- will be attained." [\(47\)](#)

The CPI leaders did not think any striving on their part for Indian independence was necessary. They were sure that the defeat of fascism plus Congress-League unity, which appeared to them as a magic wand, would automatically open the gate to India's independence.

### *The CPI and the Pakistan Demand*

In *Forward to Freedom* Joshi spoke of the "red herrings of Pakistan and Akhand Hindustan".<sup>(48)</sup> The enlarged plenum of the CPI Central Committee, held in September 1942, stated in a resolution "On Pakistan and National Unity" that each one of the various nationalities of India should enjoy "the right to exist as an autonomous state within the free Indian union or federation and will have the right to secede from it if it may so desire". This guaranteeing "the right of autonomous state existence and of secession" to "nationalities having Muslim faith" should "form the basis for unity between the National Congress and the League". The resolution added: "In the case of the Bengali Muslims of the Eastern and Northern districts of Bengal where they form an overwhelming majority, they may form themselves into an autonomous region in the state of Bengal or may form a separate state." *The resolution recognized "Western Punjabis (dominantly Muslims)" and Sikhs, besides the Muslims of East and North Bengal, as separate nationalities.* In his report entitled "Pakistan and National Unity" to the enlarged plenum, Adhikari said:

"The demand for Pakistan, if we look at its progressive essence, is in reality the demand for the self-determination and separation of the areas of *Muslim nationalities* of the Punjab, N.W. Frontier, Sind, Baluchistan and of the eastern districts of Bengal."<sup>(49)</sup>

To the CPI religion became at this time an important criterion of nationality.

*In People's War of 12 November 1944, Adhikari described the Pakistan demand as "the freedom demand of the Muslim League".*<sup>(50)</sup>

Not to see the classes and their interests behind the policies of the Congress and of the League was not communism. Both these parties dominated by the rival sections of the big bourgeoisie of the Hindu (and Parsi) and Muslim communities were enemies of the principle of self-determination of nationalities. While the Congress leadership was striving to become the sole heir to the British raj in an *akhand* Bharat, the League leadership wanted to carve out several provinces which the Muslim big bourgeoisie could dominate. Both relied on British imperialism to give them what they wanted; both wanted to remain within the framework of dependence on British imperialism; and both were enemies of the toiling people.

The task was not to appeal to the Congress and League leaders and whine day in and day out for Congress-League unity, which actually meant the unity of the rival sections of the big bourgeoisie, dependent on imperialism, but to expose them and their policies, to fight them for independent mobilization of the people of all communities, especially the major communities, under the leadership of the Communist Party.

Instead of exposing the game of the Muslim League and asking progressive Muslims to fight it, the CPI leadership urged them to join the League.

A prominent CPI leader Sajjad Zaheer wrote :

"It is a good and fine thing, a happy augury, for Indian Muslims and for India as a whole that the Muslim League continues to grow and gather around it millions of our liberty-loving people.... In the increasing strength and capacity of the League to move the Muslim masses on the path of progress and democracy lies the salvation of millions of our Muslim countrymen and the possibility of Congress-League unity."<sup>(51)</sup>

The CPI leadership lent support to Rajagopalachari's formula for the partition of India on religious lines. In a pamphlet *"They Must Meet Again"*, which Joshi wrote after the failure of the negotiations between Gandhi and Jinnah in September 1944, the CPI General Secretary unequivocally supported the Pakistan demand of the Muslim League and boasted that the CPI had made it popular among the supporters of the Congress.<sup>(52)</sup>

Joshi insisted that the Muslims should have the right to form their state comprising all the Muslim-majority areas and that there should be no plebiscite before its establishment.(53)

In "Congress and Communists" Joshi wrote :

"...just as in one simple slogan, 'Swaraj', Gandhiji gave expression to our freedom urge, so Mr Jinnah through the slogan of Pakistan has given expression to the freedom urge of the Muslims, for absolute independence in their own homelands."(54)

The CPI was not content only with propagating that the League was a freedom-loving, anti-imperialist organization. In Bengal it tried its best to defend the policies of the League ministry, dominated by big compradors like the Ispahanis and by big landlords like Nazimuddin who headed the ministry, and dependent for survival on British expatriate capitalists. It was a corrupt ministry whose policies were accentuating the famine conditions in Bengal in 1943. The CPI did not hesitate to defend this ministry and slandered all those who opposed its policies.(55)

There was a shift in the CPI's stand on the Pakistan issue towards the end of 1945 when it drafted its election manifesto. In this manifesto there is no mention of "Muslim nationalities" or of Pakistan. Instead, it proposed that there should be "17 sovereign National Constituent Assemblies based on the natural homelands of various Indian peoples" -- Pathanland, Western Punjab, Central Punjab, Hidustan, Andhra, Bengal and so on. *These 17 constituent assemblies should elect delegates to the All India Constituent Assembly* and should "enjoy the unfettered right to negotiate, formulate and finally to decide their mutual relations within an Independent India, on the basis of complete equality". The Muslims of the eastern districts of Bengal were no longer regarded as a separate nation. Instead, the manifesto said:

"The Communist Party stands for a United and Free Bengal in a free India. Bengal as the common homeland of the Bengali Muslims and Hindus should be free to exercise its right of self-determination through a Sovereign Constituent Assembly based on adult franchise and to define its relation with the rest of India."

The CPI was then in favour of "a voluntary Union of sovereign national States".(56)

Within a few months there was again a shift when the CPI drafted a memorandum and submitted it to the British Cabinet Mission in mid-April 1946. The memorandum proposed that *the All India Constituent Assembly should be directly elected* -- not by the delegates of 17 constituent assemblies -- on the basis of adult franchise, that "linguistically and culturally homogeneous national units" should be constituted after redemarcation of the boundaries of the provinces and the dissolution of the native states. The people of each of these eighteen national units, including Kashmir, "should have the unfettered right of self-determination, i.e., the right to decide freely whether they will join the Indian Union or form a separate sovereign state or another Indian Union". The CPI stood "for a free, voluntary democratic Indian Union of sovereign units".(57)

## Appendix

### Gandhi and His Charisma: A Brief Note

Some reviewers of the first volume of this book have criticized it on the ground that it draws a portrait of Gandhi (based, of course, on his words and deeds) which can hardly be reconciled with his charismatic influence on the people. In their view a leader who followed policies opposed to the interests of the people could hardly enjoy the charisma that Gandhi did. It may be noted that the critics have neither refuted my arguments and the facts cited by me nor pointed out any inaccuracy in my quotes from Gandhi and their interpretations.

Gandhi was indeed a charismatic leader, for he could attract, influence, and inspire devotion among people. But charisma, the ability to influence and inspire people, does not presuppose that the policies of a leader

possessed of it necessarily serve the interests of the people. Hitler enjoyed charisma among the Germans for some time; so did Jinnah among the Muslims. Few would agree that their policies were right. There may be a complex of factors contributing to a leader's charisma.

Before we discuss what went into the making of Gandhi's charisma, we would note the limits within which it worked.

First, Gandhi's charisma, as we have seen, failed to work on the Muslims. Second, a large section of the scheduled castes and tribes remained untouched by his charismatic influence. Third, his ability to influence and inspire the politically-inclined youth of India was very much limited. Fourth, towards the end of his life, his charisma ceased to work on his close associates who had cherished implicit faith in him before.

A few words about the period which saw Gandhi's advent in Indian politics. World War I intensified the crisis of British imperialism. During the war itself the British imperialists realized that it would be necessary to make devolution of power by stages to Indian collaborators, which, instead of weakening their rule, would strengthen it, and the Secretary of State Montagu made the appropriate declaration in August 1917. The appointment of the Indian Industrial Commission 1916-18, the Montagu-Chelmsford Report of 1918, and the Government of India Act 1919 were so many carrots dangled before the comprador bourgeoisie and other upper classes and their leaders in order to associate them with the administration. It is worth remembering that World War I had contributed greatly to the development, expansion and strengthening of the Indian big bourgeoisie who had emerged as agents of British capital.

On the other hand, unrest swept through this sub-continent towards the end of the war. By 1916, as Viceroy Chelmsford said, India had been "bled absolutely white".<sup>(1)</sup> In Punjab press-gang methods were widely used to recruit soldiers, and people were forced to make contributions to the War Fund. The raj's measures to bleed the people white were compounded by the reckless profiteering and swindling by the Indian big bourgeoisie. Both in India and the world outside, the popular forces were growing and presenting an immediate as well as potential threat to imperialism and its agents. The great Russian Revolution was awakening the masses, and the right of self-determination of the colonial peoples was placed by history on the agenda. Early in 1918 the British government observed:

"The Revolution in Russia in its beginning was regarded in India as a triumph over despotism; and... it has given impetus to Indian political aspirations."<sup>(2)</sup>

In the immediate post-war days the struggles of workers were breaking out in Bombay and other places. Discontent was simmering among the peasantry whom the landlords, the usurers, British and comprador merchant capital had reduced to a state of pauperization. During the war itself a section of the youth took to the path of violence to overthrow British rule.

It was at such a crossroads of history that Gandhi appeared on India's political stage. Early in April 1915 Gandhi, who had offered in London his active help to British war-efforts, returned to India at the request of the British Under-Secretary of State for India. While in Africa for twenty-two years, he was full of eulogy for the British colonialists and "vied with Englishmen in loyalty to the throne": it was his "love of truth [that] was at the root of this loyalty".<sup>(3)</sup>

It was in South Africa that Gandhi devised the form of struggle -- satyagraha -- an ideal weapon with which to emasculate the anti-imperialist spirit of the people. Gandhi himself declared that his satyagraha technique was intended to combat revolutionary violence. It may be borne in mind that this prophet of non-violence, though violently opposed to the use of violence by the people in the struggle against British imperialism, actively supported, whether in South Africa, London or India, the most violent wars launched by the British masters and, towards the close of his life, was in favour of war between India and Pakistan and approved of or suggested the march of troops into Junagadh, Kashmir and Hyderabad.<sup>(4)</sup>

Gandhi's activities in South Africa were watched keenly by the Indian big bourgeoisie like Sir Ratan Tata, Sir Purshotamdas and others, besides some of the princes, who overwhelmed him with large funds to help him to carry on his work. They had found in him the man they were seeking, the man who would be a powerful bulwark against all revolutionary struggles. He was welcomed back home both by the raj which bestowed signal honours on him for the services rendered by him in South Africa as well as by the Indian big bourgeoisie. On the eve of his departure from London, General Smuts, the South African minister responsible for the savage repression on Indian workers in South Africa during Gandhi's stay there, told the press that Gandhi would prove to be "an enormous asset to Britain".<sup>(5)</sup> And Gandhi did not belie Smuts's expectations. On his arrival in India Gandhi pledged his loyalty to the British and declared war on the revolutionaries, and the raj used him for furthering the cause of the war and recruiting Indian soldiers.

There were three main factors which contributed to the making of Gandhi's charisma.

### ***A Superb Cocktail of Religion and Politics***

Gandhi's charisma among the Hindus owed much to his capacity to make a superb cocktail of religion and politics. His continual references to God, to 'the inner voice' and to the religious scriptures and epics, his claims that his steps were guided by God (that for instance his fasts were undertaken at the call of God), his *ashrams* and his ascetic's robe swayed the Hindu masses powerfully in this land where godmen flourish even today. His harking back to a mythical past, the Ram Rajya, had an immense appeal to the backward-looking Hindus, especially the peasantry enmeshed in feudal ties. He never hesitated to make unabashed exploitation of the religious credulity of the peasant masses and of other toiling people who shared the peasant outlook. When Rabindranath Tagore met Romain Rolland and his two friends in June 1926, Rabindranath dwelt on Gandhi's "variations and contradictions, the compromises he has accepted and that sort of secret bad faith which makes him prove to himself by sophistries that the decisions he takes are those demanded by virtue and the divine law even when the contrary is true *and he must be aware of the fact*".<sup>(6)</sup>

Besides his *ashrams* and the ascetic's garb, the prayer-meetings Gandhi held every day, where he blended prayers and politics, were a powerful weapon of his with which he swayed the mass mind. Kanji Dwarkadas said that Gandhi "was exploiting for political purposes these public prayers to keep and continue his hold on ignorant and superstitious people".<sup>(7)</sup>

Subhas observed that in this land where the "spiritual man has always wielded the largest influence", Gandhi "came to be looked upon by the mass of the people as a Mahatma before he became the undisputed political leader of India". Subhas said that at the Nagpur Congress in December 1920, Jinnah, who had addressed Gandhi as 'Mr Gandhi', was "shouted down by thousands of people who insisted that he should address him as 'Mahatma Gandhi'". Subhas added:

"Consciously or unconsciously, the Mahatma fully exploited the mass psychology of the people.... He was exploiting many of the weak traits in the character of his countrymen [like inordinate belief in fate and in the supernatural, indifference to modern scientific development, etc.], which had accounted for India's downfall to a large extent.... In some parts of the country the Mahatma began to be worshipped as an Avatar [incarnation of God]".<sup>(8)</sup>

The appeal of Gandhi as a leader to the masses, as David Petrie, Director of the Intelligence Bureau, Government of India, from 1924 to 1931 rightly said, "was semi-divine" and his "influence was far more religious than political".<sup>(9)</sup>

Gandhi did his best to turn the gaze of the people backward, to revive the obscurantist ideas and faiths of the past and to blunt the power of reason. When it suited him he talked of the "sinfulness" of foreign cloth or of the Bihar earthquake in 1934 as having been caused by the caste Hindus' sin of untouchability. His "moral" outpourings on modern civilization, industry, medicine, etc., had their appeal to the masses of the people in a colonial and semi-feudal society, who groaning under the impact of a bastard civilization felt yearnings for the supposed pristine glory of a vanished age. Gandhi knew how credulous the masses were. "If one makes a



fuss of eating and drinking and wears a *langoti*", said Gandhi, "one can easily acquire the title of Mahatma in this country." Again he said: "in our country, a Mahatma enjoys the right to do anything. He may commit murder, indulge in acts of debauchery or whatever else he chooses; he is always pardoned. Who is there to question him?"(10)

Ravinder Kumar was right when he observed:

"More significantly, the religious idiom of Gandhi's politics widened the gulf between the two major communities of the sub-continent, and was probably one of the reasons behind its division into the two states of India and Pakistan in 1947."(11)

### *Deification of Gandhi*

Systematic efforts were made by interested classes and persons to deify Gandhi -- not without his knowledge. During the Bardoli satyagraha of 1928,(12) which opposed the government's enhancement of land revenue "affecting a small but dominant landed class", Vallabhbhai Patel and others including Gandhi "deliberately used a religious idiom in their speeches and writings". Those reluctant to join the satyagraha were warned that "it would be difficult...for them to face God after death on account of their unholy actions". Support of the various social groups was sought "on caste and religious grounds". The tribal people who constituted almost one half of the Bardoli taluk's population, many of whom were serfs of their landowners, were told that their gods Siliya and Simaliya, who had grown old, had sent Gandhi, "*their new `god`*", to look after them. They were enjoined "to follow their dharma" and obey the command of their new god who wore a *langoti* like them.(13)

The following was one of the verses of a Gujarati song:

"Oh Englishman, the God Gandhiji came in the end and your days have been numbered."(14)

This deification of Gandhi was not confined to Gujarat. Shahid Amin writes that "legends about his `divinity' circulated at the time of his visit to Gorakhpur [on 8 February 1921]". To quote Amin, "Even in the eyes of some local Congressmen this `deification' -- `unofficial canonization' as the *Pioneer* put it -- assumed dangerously distended proportions.... Most of the rumours about the Mahatma's *pratap* (power/glory) were reported in the local press between February and May 1921." Amin says that numerous stories of Gandhi's miracle-making powers -- many times more numerous than Christ's -- were spread by `nationalist' journals and by word of mouth. Stories of supernatural beings appearing and asking the people to do *puja* to [worship] Gandhi were also circulated. According to Amin, the fact of the reporting of these rumours in the local nationalist weekly *Swadesh* indicates that "these were actively spread by interested parties".(15)

Similar stories about Gandhi's miraculous powers were spread in Bihar and he was deified.(16) P.C. Bamford, a high-ranking intelligence official, noted:

"unscrupulous agitators were circulating to the credulous masses stories of divine attributes and miraculous powers [possessed by Gandhi]. Gandhi's influence was strengthened by a spurious divinity."(17)

As noted before, Pandit R.S. Shukla, then Prime Minister of the Central Provinces and Berar, made it obligatory by an order issued in September 1938 to use the word `Mahatma' before Gandhi's name in all official papers. `Gandhi-worship' was also prevalent in some places of that province.(18)

In present-day Koraput in Orissa, rumours were spread early in July 1938 `that Mr Gandhi will visit the area soon and those who do not produce Congress tickets will suffer from ailments!' An official publication stated:

"The Congress had built up an organization and acquired a hold over these backward tribes [in Koraput] by making attractive promises...; they also played on their superstition, and in some places Mr Gandhi was deified and temple ritual took place at the Congress office."(19)

And, soon after 8 August 1942, a circular was issued in the name of the Congress reproducing Gandhi's message to the people on the eve of his arrest. It was entitled *Six Commandments of Gandhi Baba*.(20)

### ***Exercises in Gandhi's Image Building***

Myths about Gandhi which have no semblance of truth were consciously built up and propagated by his colleagues. Two illustrative ones may be cited, which will perhaps suffice. Nehru wrote:

"Crushed in the dark misery of the present, she [India] had tried to find relief in helpless muttering and in vague dreams of the past and the future, but he [Gandhi] came and gave hope to her mind and strength to her much-battered body, and the future became an alluring vision".(21)

Nehru here deliberately falsified the history of the anti-colonial struggles of the Indian people before Gandhi's advent -- struggles which were not diversionary ones like those in which Nehru participated under the leadership of Gandhi. Speaking of 1917 and 1918, Percival Spear correctly pointed out that "the political classes were occupied by the government's political moves. But the masses were getting steadily more restive. The precipitation of these feelings into an anti-government movement came about, as so often, by the government's attempt to prevent it."(22) It was Gandhi's mission to shackle all anti-government and anti-feudal struggles, not to organize or lead them. The future that Gandhi was striving for -- self-government within the British empire and the preservation of the social status quo -- was indeed 'an alluring vision' to the Nehrus and the Birlas.

Rajendra Prasad wrote:

Gandhi "went to Noakhali [in 1946]. The result was that the Hindus recovered their courage and morale. The Muslims who, to begin with, suspected his *bona fides*, began slowly to be affected by his presence and his speeches, and saw the error of their ways. That was one of the marvels of non-violence in action..."(23)

No doubt, this is a marvel of untruth. The Muslims, who at first flocked to Gandhi's meetings, soon boycotted them and put every conceivable pressure on him to leave Noakhali. And how could the apostle of non-violence restore a sense of security to the minds of the Hindus when he himself moved about under the best possible armed protection provided by the Bengal government?(24) It should be noted that the ordinary Muslims were not responsible for the communal riots, and the section which was involved in them was led by a gangster -- Mian Ghulam Sarwar -- who had unsuccessfully contested the 1946 Assembly election helped with Congress funds.(25) It may also be borne in mind that the Muslims of the neighbouring district of Tripura (Comilla) organized themselves -- not under the influence of Gandhi -- and successfully prevented the gangsters from spreading the riots in that district.

We refrain from citing more samples of image-building so essential for the success of Congress policies. In the absence of a revolutionary party to call the bluff, the Congress leaders were apt to make breathtaking claims. After reading, according to his biographer and disciple Tendulkar, the first volume of Marx's *Capital* in the Aga Khan Palace at the age of seventy-four, Gandhi commented: "I would have written it better as assuming, of course, I had the leisure for study Marx has put in." In this context what Frances Gunther wrote to Nehru may be found interesting: "Essentially ignorant -- his ideas on science, food, sex, education, back to the village, etc. are crack potted and assigned by another man would arouse nothing but a yawn."(26)

Gandhi's charisma amounted to something like adoration for a holy person who was venerated but whose teachings were seldom followed. In the eyes of the Hindu masses who came under the spell of his charisma, he was a saint, an avatar, whose *darshan* was coveted, but whose sermons on non-violence or injunctions to carry out the 'constructive programme' or to abolish untouchability fell mostly on deaf ears. It may be noted

that his 'constructive' workers were usually paid. When, in January 1947, Gandhi was asked "How did your *Ahimsa* work in Bihar?", he replied: "It did not work at all. It failed miserably." [\(27\)](#)

Gandhi of the popular imagination was not as he really was. He became in the imagination of the oppressed and exploited, the simple and unsophisticated masses a symbol of anti-imperialist, anti-feudal struggle -- the very opposite of what he was. They created him in the image of an ideal hero of their conception. During the Rowlatt Satyagraha, a small band of Muslim workers and peasants, which called itself 'Danda Fauj', paraded the streets of Lahore in April 1919 and plastered its walls with posters which appealed to Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs to enlist in the 'Danda Fauj' and fight against the "English monkeys", for this was "the command of Mahatma Gandhi". The workers of the European-owned tea plantations in the Surma valley in Assam left them and began their long trek back home during the non-co-operation days, thinking this had been the call of Gandhi. The peasants of Chauri-Chaura violently resisted and retaliated against the murderous attacks on them by the police with Gandhi's name on their lips. [\(28\)](#)

Besides Gandhi's extraordinary astuteness, his unabashed exploitation of the religious credulity of the Hindu masses, two other factors contributed to the making of his charisma.

### ***British Imperialism Confirms Gandhi as the National Leader***

One was that, appreciating his worth, British imperialism recognized him as the national leader. Like General Smuts, many Viceroys including Willingdon regarded him as an asset. In combating the militant forces of anti-colonial and anti-feudal struggle, the British ruling classes counted on his help and he never failed them. As Judith Brown wrote, "Gandhi was impelled into or at least confirmed in a national leadership role by the Government's attitude, its needs and fears, as much as those of his followers or the compulsions of his own personality.... They [the British officials] angled for his help in the struggle against violence and terrorism." [\(29\)](#)

From his days in South Africa, Gandhi "regularly maintained personal contact with the highest levels of Government, even when no specific issue was at hand". [\(30\)](#) Jacques Pouchepadass has referred to 'fantastic rumours' that circulated about Gandhi in Champaran in 1917 -- rumours that Gandhi had been sent to Champaran by the Viceroy, or even the King, to redress the grievances of the peasants; that the administration of Champaran was going to be handed over to the Indians and so on. According to Pouchepadass, "*many of these rumours were very consciously spread by the local leaders*". [\(31\)](#) The Indian elite, the rich peasants and others looked upon him as their guide and placed implicit faith in him, for his easy accessibility to the highest representatives of the raj fed their opportunist hopes. Men like Prasad, Patel and many others gathered around him thinking that while risks were small, gains would be enormous.

### ***Big Bourgeois Support***

The other prop -- a more important one -- on which Gandhi's charisma rested was the lavish support extended to him by the Indian big bourgeoisie. With his home-coming, besides the Tatas and Thakurdases, the Sarabhais, Birlas and others rallied to his support. The Indian business elite hailed him: his message of non-violence, his satyagraha, his faith in the raj, his political aspirations, his abhorrence of class struggle, his 'change of heart' and 'trusteeship' theories, his determination to preserve the social status quo, his 'constructive programme' intended to thwart revolutionary action -- all these and more convinced them that in the troubled times ahead he was their best friend. His outlook on industrialization never frightened them. Rather, they expected that Gandhi's 'moral' outpourings on industry and modern civilization would weave a spell on the masses, victims of cruel exploitation who were yearning to escape from it. His *ashram*, all other organizations of his, and all his political, social and moral campaigns were financed by them. Modifying somewhat Sarojini Naidu's quip, one might say that it cost the big bourgeoisie, the Birlas in particular, quite a big amount to keep him in poverty. And he too attended to their interests to the very end of his life. During the war when the "prices of cloth reached levels more than five times the pre-war level", the government intervened, cloth prices were put under control and fixed at levels which "industrialists themselves were not reluctant to accept". The profits of the cotton mill industry, in which capital to the tune of Rs 50 crore was

"primarily invested", soared from Rs 7 crore in 1940 to Rs 109 crore in 1943. But the declared profits were only 'peanuts' compared to the actual profits made when hoarding and blackmarketing were the rule.(32) G.D. Birla's biographer, Ram Niwas Jaju, writes that "the boom in the speculation market and then the war gave a boost to their activities, and they [the Birlas] acquired twenty-two big factories" in addition to what they had before. On 24 March 1947 G.D. Birla "wrote a seven-page letter" to Rajagopalachari, a member of the Interim Government, asking for removal of control on cloth.(33) Gandhi started inveighing against rationing and control on prices of food and cloth. He pitied the millionaires. "We do have millionaires in our country", he said, "and they make millions too, but even they are left with little money because of heavy taxation." He condemned 'control' "as a vicious thing" and "continuing the controls as criminal".(34) And control on cloth was lifted and cloth prices shot up immediately to the satisfaction of the poor millionaires and to the immense distress of the common people.

Edgar Snow was not wrong when he said: "Nobody else in India could play *this dual role of saint for the masses and champion of big business, which was the secret of Gandhi's power*"(35) -- the secret of Gandhi's charisma. A negative factor that sustained Gandhi's charisma was the weakness of the working class and the Communist Party of India.

## ABBREVIATIONS

AICC :	All India Congress Committee
AICC Papers :	All India Congress Committee Papers (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi)
AIKS :	All India Kisan Sabha
AIML :	All India Muslim League
AISF :	All India Students Federation
AISPC :	All India States People's Conference
AITUC :	All India Trade Union Congress
CC :	Central Committee
CI :	Communist International
(The) Congress Encyclopaedia :	<i>The Encyclopaedia of the Indian National Congress</i>
CPGB :	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPI :	Communist Party of India
CPSU(B) :	Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik)
CSP :	Congress Socialist Party
CWC :	Congress Working Committee
CWG :	<i>Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi</i>
ECCI :	Executive Committee of the Communist International
EE :	<i>Eastern Economist</i>
FB :	Forward Bloc
FICCI :	Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry
GOI :	Government of India
IAR :	<i>Indian Annual Register</i>
IESHR :	<i>Indian Economic and Social History Review</i>
ILO :	International Labour Organisation
IMPRECOR :	<i>International Press Correspondence</i>

JN Papers :	Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (NMML)
PB :	Polit Bureau
PCC :	Provincial Congress Committee
PT Papers :	Purshotamdas Thakurdas Papers (NMML)
RTC :	Round Table Conference
RTUC :	Red Trade Union Congress
<i>SWM :</i>	<i>Selected Works of Mao Tsetung</i>
<i>SWN :</i>	<i>Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru</i>
<i>TOP :</i>	<i>Constitutional Relations between Britain and India: The Transfer of Power 1942-47</i>
<i>Wickenden Report :</i>	<i>Quit India Movement: British Secret Report</i>

The Roman numeral after a book indicates the number of the volume and